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A VIEW OF THE INTERNAL EVIDENCE OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

A

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OF THE

INTERNAL EVIDENCE

OF THE

CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

Almoſt thou perſuadeſt me to be a Chriſtian.
Acts xxvi. 28.

BY SOAME JENYNS, ESQ.

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A VIEW OF THE INTERNAL EVIDENCE OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

MOST of the writers, who have undertaken to prove the divine origin of the Chriſtian Religion, have had recourſe to arguments drawn from theſe three heads: the prophecies ſtill extant in the Old Teſtament—the miracles recorded in the New—or the

internal evidence ariſing from that excellence, and thoſe clear marks of ſupernatural interpoſition, which are ſo conſpicuous in the religion itſelf.—The two former have been ſufficiently explained and inforced by the ableſt pens; but the laſt, which ſeems to carry with it the greateſt degree of conviction, has never, I think, been conſidered with that attention which it deſerves.

I mean not here to depreciate the proofs ariſing from either prophecies, or miracles: they both have or ought to have their proper weight; prophecies are permanent miracles, whoſe authority is ſufficiently confirmed by their completion,

pletion, and are therefore ſolid proofs of the ſupernatural origin of a religion, whoſe truth they were intended to teſtify; ſuch are thoſe to be found in various parts of the ſcriptures relative to the coming of the Meſſiah, the deſtruction of Jeruſalem, and the unexampled ſtate in which the Jews have ever ſince continued, all ſo circumſtantially deſcriptive of the events, that they ſeem rather hiſtories of paſt, than predictions of future tranſactions; and whoever will ſeriouſly conſider the immenſe diſtance of time between ſome of them and the events which they foretell, the uninterrupted chain by which they are connected for many thouſand

years, how exactly they correſpond with thoſe events, and how totally unapplicable they are to all others in the hiſtory of mankind; I ſay, whoever conſiders theſe circumſtances, he will ſcarcely be perſuaded to believe, that they can be the productions of preceding artifice, or poſterior application, or can entertain the leaſt doubt of their being derived from ſupernatural inſpiration.

The miracles recorded in the New Teſtament to have been performed by Chriſt and his Apoſtles, were certainly convincing proofs of their divine commiſſion to thoſe who ſaw them; and as they were ſeen by ſuch numbers, and are as well

well atteſted, as other hiſtorical facts, and above all, as they were wrought on ſo great and ſo wonderful an occaſion, they muſt ſtill be admitted as evidence of no inconſiderable force; but, I think, they muſt now depend for much of their credibility on the truth of that religion, whoſe credibility they were at firſt intended to ſupport. To prove therefore the truth of the Chriſtian Religion, we ſhould begin by ſhewing the internal marks of Divinity, which are ſtamped upon it; becauſe on this the credibility of the prophecies and miracles in a great meaſure depends: for if we have once reaſon to be convinced, that this religion is de-

rived from a ſupernatural origin; prophecies and miracles will become ſo far from being incredible, that it will be highly probable, that a ſupernatural revelation ſhould be foretold, and inforced by ſupernatural means.

What pure Chriſtianity is, diveſted of all its ornaments, appendages, and corruption, I pretend not to ſay; but what it is not, I will venture to affirm, which is, that it is not the offspring of fraud or fiction: ſuch, on a ſuperficial view, I know it muſt appear to every man of good ſenſe, whoſe ſenſe has been altogether employed on other ſubjects; but if any one will give himſelf the trouble to examine it

with

with accuracy and candor, he will plainly ſee, that however fraud and fiction may have grown up with it, yet it never could have been grafted on the ſame ſtock, nor planted by the ſame hand.

To aſcertain the true ſyſtem, and genuine doctrines of this religion after the undecided controverſies of above ſeventeen centuries, and to remove all the rubbiſh, which artifice and ignorance have been heaping upon it during all that time, would indeed be an arduous taſk, which I ſhall by no means undertake; but to ſhew, that it cannot poſſibly be derived from human wiſdom, or human im-

poſture, is a work, I think, attended with no great difficulty, and requiring no extraordinary abilities, and therefore I ſhall attempt that, and that alone, by ſtating, and then explaining, the following plain, and undeniable propoſitions.

Firſt, That there is now extant a book intitled the New Teſtament.

Secondly, That from this book may be extracted a ſyſtem of religion intirely new, both with regard to the object and the doctrines, not only infinitely ſuperior to, but unlike every thing, which had ever before entered into the mind of man.

Thirdly,

Thirdly, That from this book, may likewiſe be collected a ſyſtem of ethicks, in which every moral precept founded on reaſon is carried to a higher degree of purity and perfection, than in any other of the wiſeſt philoſophers of preceding ages; every moral precept founded on falſe principles is totally omitted, and many new precepts added peculiarly correſponding with the new object of this religion.

Laſtly, That ſuch a ſyſtem of religion and morality could not poſſibly have been the work of any man, or ſet of men; much leſs of thoſe obſcure, ignorant, and illiterate perſons, who actually did diſcover,

diſcover, and publiſh it to the world; and that therefore it muſt undoubtedly have been effected by the interpoſition of divine power, that is, that it muſt derive its origin from God.

PRO-

PROPOSITION I.

VERY little need be ſaid, to eſtabliſh my firſt Propoſition, which is ſingly this: That there is now extant a book intitled the New Teſtament: that is, there is a collection of writings diſtinguiſhed by that denomination, containing four hiſtorical accounts of the birth, life, actions, diſcourſes and death of an extraordinary perſon named Jeſus Chriſt, who was born in the reign of Auguſtus Cæſar, preached a new religion throughout the country of Judæa, and was put to a cruel and ignominious death in the reign of Tiberius. Alſo one other hiſtorical

account of the travels, tranſactions, and orations of ſome mean and illiterate men, known by the title of his apoſtles, whom he commiſſioned to propagate his religion after his death; which he foretold them he muſt ſuffer in confirmation of its truth. To theſe are added ſeveral epiſtolary writings, addreſſed by theſe perſons to their fellow-labourers in this work, or to the ſeveral churches or ſocieties of Chriſtians, which they had eſtabliſhed in the ſeveral cities through which they had paſſed.

It would not be difficult to prove, that theſe books were written ſoon after thoſe extraordinary events, which are the ſubjects of them; as we find them quoted,

and

and referred to by an uninterrupted ſucceſſion of writers from thoſe to the preſent times: nor would it be leſs eaſy to ſhew, that the truth of all thoſe events, miracles only excepted, can no more be reaſonably queſtioned, than the truth of any other facts recorded in any hiſtory whatever: as there can be no more reaſon to doubt, that there exiſted ſuch a perſon as Jeſus Chriſt, ſpeaking, acting, and ſuffering in ſuch a manner as is there deſcribed, than that there were ſuch men as Tiberius, Herod, or Pontius Pilate, his cotemporaries; or to ſuſpect, that Peter, Paul, and James were not the authors of thoſe epiſtles, to which their names

are

are affixed, than that Cicero and Pliny did not write thoſe which are aſcribed to them. It might alſo be made appear, that theſe books having been wrote by various perſons, at different times, and in diſtant places, could not poſſibly have been the work of a ſingle impoſtor, nor of a fraudulent combination, being all ſtamped with the ſame marks of an uniform originality in their very frame and compoſition.

But all theſe circumſtances I ſhall paſs over unobſerved, as they do not fall in with the courſe of my argument, nor are neceſſary for the ſupport of it. Whether theſe books were wrote by the authors

authors whoſe names are prefixed to them; whether they have been enlarged, diminiſhed, or any way corrupted by the artifice or ignorance of tranſlators, or tranſcribers; whether in the hiſtorical parts the writers were inſtructed by a perpetual, a partial, or by any inſpiration at all; whether in the religious and moral parts, they received their doctrines from a divine influence, or from the inſtructions and converſation of their maſter; whether in their facts or ſentiments there is always the moſt exact agreement, or whether in both they ſometimes differ from each other; whether they are in any caſe miſtaken, or always infallible;

fallible; or ever pretended to be ſo, I ſhall not here diſpute: let the Deiſt avail himſelf of all theſe doubts and difficulties, and decide them in conformity to his own opinions, I ſhall not contend, becauſe they affect not my argument: all that I aſſert is a plain fact, which cannot be denied, that ſuch writings do now exiſt.

PRO-

PROPOSITION II.

MY ſecond propoſition is not quite ſo ſimple, but, I think, not leſs undeniable than the former, and is this—That from this book may be extracted a ſyſtem of religion intirely new, both with regard to the object, and the doctrines, not only infinitely ſuperior to, but totally unlike every thing, which had ever before entered into the mind of man: I ſay extracted, becauſe all the doctrines of this religion having been delivered at various times, and on various occaſions, and here only hiſtorically recorded, no uniform or regular

ſyſtem of theology is here to be found; and better perhaps it had been, if leſs labour had been employed by the learned, to bend and twiſt theſe divine materials into the poliſhed forms of human ſyſtems, to which they never will ſubmit, and for which they were never intended by their great author. Why he choſe not to leave any ſuch behind him we know not, but it might poſſibly be, becauſe he knew, that the imperfection of man was incapable of receiving ſuch a ſyſtem, and that we are more properly, and more ſafely conducted by the diſtant, and ſcattered rays, than by the too powerful ſunſhine of divine illumination:

mination: "If I have told you "earthly things," ſays he, "and ye "believe not, how ſhall ye be- "lieve, if I tell you of heavenly "things *?" that is, If my inſtructions concerning your behaviour in the preſent as relative to a future life, are ſo difficult to be underſtood, that you can ſcarcely believe me, how ſhall you believe, if I endeavoured to explain to you the nature of celeſtial Beings, the deſigns of Providence, and the myſteries of his diſpenſations; ſubjects which you have neither ideas to comprehend, nor language to expreſs?

* John iii. 12.

Firſt then, the object of this religion is entirely new, and is this, to prepare us by a ſtate of probation for the kingdom of heaven. This is every where profeſſed by Chriſt and his Apoſtles to be the chief end of the Chriſtian's life; the crown for which he is to contend, the goal to which he is to run, the harveſt which is to pay him for all his labors: Yet previous to their preaching no ſuch prize was ever hung out to mankind, nor any means preſcribed for the attainment of it.

It is indeed true, that ſome of the philoſophers of antiquity entertained notions of a future ſtate, but mixed with much doubt and uncer-

uncertainty: their legiſlators alſo endeavoured to infuſe into the minds of the people a belief of rewards and puniſhments after death; but by this they only intended to give a ſanction to their laws, and to enforce the practice of virtue for the benefit of mankind in the preſent life: this alone ſeems to have been their end, and a meritorious end it was; but Chriſtianity not only operates more effectually to this end, but has a nobler deſign in view, which is, by a proper education here to render us fit members of a celeſtial ſociety hereafter. In all former religions the good of the preſent life was the firſt object; in the Chriſtian it is

but the ſecond; in thoſe, men were incited to promote that good by the hopes of a future reward; in this, the practice of virtue is injoined in order to qualify them for that reward. There is great difference, I apprehend, in theſe two plans, that is, in adhering to Virtue, from its preſent utility, in expectation of future happineſs, and living in ſuch a manner as to qualify us for the acceptance and enjoyment of that happineſs; and the conduct and diſpoſitions of thoſe, who act on theſe different principles, muſt be no leſs different: on the firſt, the conſtant practice of juſtice, temperance, and ſobriety, will be ſufficient; but on the latter, we muſt

add

add to theſe an habitual piety, faith, reſignation, and contempt of the world: the firſt may make us very good citizens, but will never produce a tolerable chriſtian. Hence it is that Chriſtianity inſiſts more ſtrongly, than any preceding inſtitution religious or moral, on purity of heart and a benevolent diſpoſition; becauſe theſe are abſolutely neceſſary to its great end; but in thoſe whoſe recommendations of virtue regard the preſent life only, and whoſe promiſed rewards in another were low and ſenſual, no preparatory qualifications were requiſite to enable men to practiſe the one, or to enjoy the other: and therefore we ſee this object is pe-

culiar to this religion; and with it was intirely new

But although this object, and the principle on which it is founded were new, and perhaps undiſcoverable by reaſon, yet when diſcovered they are ſo conſonant to it, that we cannot but readily aſſent to them. For the truth of this principle, That the preſent life is a ſtate of probation, and education to prepare us for another, is confirmed by every thing which we ſee around us: It is the only key which can open to us the deſigns of Providence in the œconomy of human affairs, the only clue, which can guide us through that pathleſs wilderneſs, and the only

only plan on which this world could poſſibly have been formed, or on which the hiſtory of it can be comprehended or explained. It could never have been formed on a plan of happineſs: becauſe it is every where overſpread with innumerable miſeries; nor of miſery, becauſe it is interſperſed with many enjoyments: it could not have been conſtituted for a ſcene of wiſdom and virtue, becauſe the hiſtory of mankind is little more than a detail of their follies, and wickedneſs: nor of vice, becauſe that is no plan at all, being deſtructive of all exiſtence, and conſequently of its own: But on this ſyſtem all that we here meet with,

may

may be eaſily accounted for; for this mixture of happineſs and miſery, of virtue and vice, neceſſarily reſults from a ſtate of probation and education; as probation implies trials, ſufferings, and a capacity of offending, and education a propriety of chaſtiſement for thoſe offences.

In the next place, the doctrines of this religion are equally new with the object; and contain ideas of God, and of man, of the preſent, and of a future life; and of the relations which all theſe bear to each other, totally unheard of, and quite diſſimilar from any which had ever been thought on, previous to its publication. No

other ever drew ſo juſt a portrait of the worthleſſneſs of this world, and all its purſuits, nor exhibited ſuch diſtinct, lively, and exquiſite pictures of the joys of another; of the reſurrection of the dead, the laſt judgment, and the triumphs of the righteous in that tremendous day, "when this corruptible "ſhall put on incorruption, and "this mortal ſhall put on immor-"tality *." No other has ever repreſented the Supreme Being in the character of three perſons united in one God †. No other has

* 1 Cor. xv. 53.

† That there ſubſiſts ſome ſuch union in the divine nature, the whole tenour of the New Teſtament ſeems to expreſs, and it

has attempted to reconcile thoſe ſeeming contradictory but both true propoſitions, the contingency of future events, and the foreknowledge of God, or the free will of the creature with the overruling grace of the Creator. No other has ſo fully declared the neceſſity of wickedneſs and puniſhment, yet ſo effectually inſtructed individuals to reſiſt the one, and to eſcape the other: no other has ever pretended to give.

it was ſo underſtood in the earlieſt ages: but whether this union does, or does not imply equality, or whether it ſubſiſts in general, or only in particular circumſtances, we are not informed, and therefore on theſe queſtions it is not only unneceſſary, but improper for us to decide.

any

any account of the depravity of man, or to point out any remedy for it: no other has ventured to declare the unpardonable nature of ſin without the influence of a mediatorial interpoſition, and a vicarious atonement from the ſufferings of a ſuperior Being *. Whether theſe wonderful doctrines

* That Chriſt ſuffered and died as an atonement for the ſins of mankind, is a doctrine ſo conſtantly and ſo ſtrongly enforced through every part of the New Teſtament, that whoever will ſeriouſly peruſe thoſe writings, and deny that it is there, may, with as much reaſon and truth, after reading the works of Thucydides and Livy, aſſert, that in them no mention is made of any facts relative to the hiſtories of Greece and Rome.

are worthy of our belief muſt depend on the opinion, which we entertain of the authority of thoſe, who publiſhed them to the world; but certain it is, that they are all ſo far removed from every tract of the human imagination, that it ſeems equally impoſſible, that they ſhould ever have been derived from the knowledge, or the artifice of man.

Some indeed there are, who, by perverting the eſtabliſhed ſignification of words, (which they call explaining) have ventured to expunge all theſe doctrines out of the Scriptures, for no other reaſon than that they are not able to comprehend them; and argue thus:—

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The ſcriptures are the word of God; in his word no propoſitions contradictory to reaſon can have a place; theſe propoſitions are contradictory to reaſon, and therefore they are not there: But if theſe bold aſſertors would claim any regard, they ſhould reverſe their argument, and ſay,—Theſe doctrines make a part, and a material part of the ſcriptures, they are contradictory to reaſon; no propoſitions contradictory to reaſon can be a part of the word of God, and therefore neither the ſcriptures, nor the pretended revelation contained in them, can be derived from him: This would be an argument worthy of rational and candid Deiſts,

and

and demand a reſpectful attention; but when men pretend to diſprove facts by reaſoning, they have no right to expect an anſwer.

And here I cannot omit obſerving, that the perſonal character of the author of this religion is no leſs new, and extraordinary, than the religion itſelf, who "ſpake as "never man ſpake *," and lived as never man lived: in proof of this, I do not mean to alledge, that he was born of a virgin, that he faſted forty days, that he performed a variety of miracles, and after being buried three days, that he aroſe from the dead; becauſe theſe accounts will have but little

* John vii. 46.

effect

effect on the minds of unbelievers, who, if they believe not the religion, will give no credit to the relation of theſe facts; but I will prove it from facts, which cannot be diſputed; for inſtance, he is the only founder of a religion in the hiſtory of mankind, which is totally unconnected with all human policy and government, and therefore totally unconducive to any worldly purpoſe whatever: all others, Mahomet, Numa, and even Moſes himſelf, blended their religious inſtitutions with their civil, and by them obtained dominion over their reſpective people; but Chriſt neither aimed at, nor would accept of any ſuch power; he re-

jected every object, which all other men purſue, and made choice of all thoſe which others fly from, and are afraid of: he refuſed power, riches, honours, and pleaſure, and courted poverty, ignominy, tortures, and death. Many have been the enthuſiaſts, and impoſtors, who have endeavoured to impoſe on the world pretended revelations, and ſome of them from pride, obſtinacy, or principle, have gone ſo far, as to lay down their lives, rather than retract; but I defy hiſtory to ſhew one, who ever made his own ſufferings and death a neceſſary part of his original plan, and eſſential to his miſſion; this Chriſt actually did, he foreſaw, foretold,

foretold, declared, their neceſſity, and voluntarily endured them. If we ſeriouſly contemplate the divine leſſons, the perfect precepts, the beautiful diſcourſes, and the conſiſtent conduct of this wonderful perſon, we cannot poſſibly imagine, that he could have been either an idiot or a madman; and yet, if he was not what he pretended to be, he can be conſidered in no other light; and even under this character he would deſerve ſome attention, becauſe of ſo ſublime and rational an inſanity there is no other inſtance in the hiſtory of mankind.

If any one can doubt of the ſuperior excellence of this religion

above all which preceded it, let him but peruſe with attention thoſe unparalleled writings in which it is tranſmitted to the preſent times, and compare them with the moſt celebrated productions of the pagan world; and if he is not ſenſible of their ſuperior beauty, ſimplicity, and originality, I will venture to pronounce, that he is as deficient in Taſte as in Faith, and that he is as bad a Critic as a Chriſtian: for in what ſchool of ancient philoſophy can he find a leſſon of morality ſo perfect as Chriſt's ſermon on the mount? From which of them can he collect an addreſs to the Deity ſo conciſe, and yet ſo comprehenſive, ſo expreſſive

preſſive of all that we want, and all that we could deprecate, as that ſhort prayer, which he formed for, and recommended to his diſciples? From the works of what ſage of antiquity can he produce ſo pathetic a recommendation of benevolence to the diſtreſſed, and enforced by ſuch aſſurances of a reward, as in thoſe words of Chriſt? "Come, ye "bleſſed of my Father! inherit the "kingdom prepared for you from "the foundation of the world: "for I was an hungred, and ye "gave me meat; I was thirſty, "and ye gave me drink; I was a "ſtranger, and ye took me in; I "was naked, and ye clothed me; "I was ſick, and ye viſited me;

" I was in priſon, and ye came un-
" to me. Then ſhall the righteous
" anſwer him, ſaying—Lord, when
" ſaw we thee an hungred, and fed
" thee, or thirſty, and gave thee
" drink? when ſaw we thee a ſtran-
" ger, and took thee in, or naked,
" and clothed thee? or when ſaw
" we thee ſick and in priſon, and
" came unto thee? Then ſhall I
" anſwer and ſay unto them;—
" Verily I ſay unto you, inaſmuch
" as you have done it to the leaſt
" of theſe my brethren, ye have
" done it unto me *." Where is there ſo juſt and ſo elegant a reproof of eagerneſs and anxiety in

* Matt. xxv. 34.

worldly

worldly purſuits, cloſed with ſo forcible an exhortation to confidence in the goodneſs of our Creator, as in theſe words?——"Be-
"hold the fowls of the air; for
"they ſow not, neither do they
"reap, nor gather into barns, yet
"your heavenly Father feedeth
"them. Are ye not much better
"than they? Conſider the lilies
"of the field, how they grow; they
"toil not, neither do they ſpin;
"and yet I ſay unto you, that even
"Solomon in all his glory was not
"arrayed like one of theſe: where-
"fore, if God ſo clothe the graſs
"of the field, which to-day is, and
"to-morrow is caſt into the oven,
"ſhall he not much more clothe

" you? O ye of little faith *!" By which of their moſt celebrated poets are the joys reſerved for the righteous in a future ſtate, ſo ſublimely deſcribed, as by this ſhort declaration, that they are ſuperior to all deſcription? " Eye hath not " ſeen, nor ear heard, neither have " entered into the heart of man, the " things which God hath prepared " for them that love him †." Where amidſt the dark clouds of pagan philoſophy can he ſhew us ſuch a clear proſpect of a future ſtate, the immortality of the ſoul, the reſurrection of the dead, and the general judgment, as in St. Paul's firſt epiſtle to the Corinthians? Or

* Matt. vi. 26. 28. † 1 Cor. ii. 9.

from

from whence can he produce ſuch cogent exhortations to the practice of every virtue, ſuch ardent incitements to piety and devotion, and ſuch aſſiſtances to attain them, as thoſe which are to be met with throughout every page of theſe inimitable writings? To quote all the paſſages in them relative to theſe ſubjects, would be almoſt to tranſcribe the whole; it is ſufficient to obſerve, that they are every where ſtamped with ſuch apparent marks of ſupernatural aſſiſtance, as render them indiſputably ſuperior to, and totally unlike all human compoſitions whatever; and this ſuperiority and diſſimilarity is ſtill more ſtrongly

marked

marked by one remarkable circumſtance peculiar to themſelves, which is, that whilſt the moral parts, being of the moſt general uſe, are intelligible to the meaneſt capacities, the learned and inquiſitive throughout all ages, perpetually find in them inexhauſtible diſcoveries, concerning the nature, attributes, and diſpenſations of Providence.

To ſay the truth, before the appearance of Chriſtianity there exiſted nothing like religion on the face of the earth; the Jewiſh only excepted: all other nations were immerſed in the groſſeſt idolatry, which had little or no connection with morality, except to corrupt it by

by the infamous examples of their imaginary deities: they all worſhipped a multiplicity of gods and dæmons, whoſe favour they courted by impious, obſcene, and ridiculous ceremonies, and whoſe anger they endeavoured to appeaſe by the moſt abominable cruelties. In the politeſt ages of the politeſt nations in the world, at a time when Greece and Rome had carried the arts of oratory, poetry, hiſtory, architecture and ſculpture to the higheſt perfection, and made no inconſiderable advances in thoſe of mathematics, natural, and even moral philoſophy, in religious knowledge they had made none at all; a ſtrong preſumption, that the

nobleſt efforts of the mind of man unaſſiſted by revelation were unequal to the taſk. Some few indeed of their philoſophers were wiſe enough to reject theſe general abſurdities, and dared to attempt a loftier flight: Plato introduced many ſublime ideas of nature, and its firſt cauſe, and of the immortality of the ſoul, which being above his own and all human diſcovery, he probably acquired from the books of Moſes or the converſation of ſome Jewiſh rabbies, which he might have met with in Egypt, where he reſided, and ſtudied for ſeveral years: from him Ariſtotle, and from both Cicero and ſome few others drew moſt amazing

amazing ſtores of philoſophical ſcience, and carried their reſearches into divine truths as far as human genius alone could penetrate. But theſe were bright conſtellations, which appeared ſingly in ſeveral centuries, and even theſe with all this knowledge were very deficient in true theology. From the viſible works of the Creation they traced the being and principal attributes of the Creator; but the relation which his being and attributes bear to man they little underſtood; of piety and devotion they had ſcarce any ſenſe, nor could they form any mode of worſhip worthy of the purity and perfection of the divine nature: they occaſionally

flung

ſung out many elegant encomiums on the native beauty, and excellence of virtue: but they founded it not on the commands of God, nor connected it with a holy life, nor hung out the happineſs of heaven as its reward, or its object. They ſometimes talked of virtue carrying men to heaven, and placing them amongſt the gods; but by this virtue they meant only the invention of arts, or feats of arms: for with them heaven was open only to legiſlators, and conquerors, the civilizers, or deſtroyers of mankind. This was then the ſummit of religion in the moſt poliſhed nations in the world, and even this was confined to a

few

few philoſophers, prodigies of genius and literature, who were little attended to, and leſs underſtood by the generality of mankind in their own countries; whilſt all the reſt were involved in one common cloud of ignorance and ſuperſtition.

At this time Chriſtianity broke forth from the eaſt like a riſing ſun, and diſpelled this univerſal darkneſs, which obſcured every part of the globe, and even at this day prevails in all thoſe remoter regions, to which its ſalutary influence has not as yet extended. From all thoſe which it has reached, it has, notwithſtanding its corruptions, baniſhed all thoſe enor-

mities, and introduced a more rational devotion, and purer morals: It has taught men the unity, and attributes of the ſupreme Being, the remiſſion of ſins, the reſurrection of the dead, life everlaſting, and the kingdom of heaven; doctrines as inconceivable to the wiſeſt of mankind antecedent to its appearance, as the Newtonian ſyſtem is at this day to the moſt ignorant tribes of ſavages in the wilds of America; doctrines, which human reaſon never could have diſcovered, but which when diſcovered, coincide with, and are confirmed by it; and which, though beyond the reach of all the learning and penetration

of

of Plato, Ariſtotle, and Cicero, are now clearly laid open to the eye of every peaſant and mechanic with the Bible in his hand. Theſe are all plain facts, too glaring to be contradicted, and therefore, whatever we may think of the authority of theſe books, the relations which they contain, or the inſpiration of their authors, of theſe facts no man, who has eyes to read, or ears to hear, can entertain a doubt; becauſe there are the books, and in them is this religion.

PROPOSITION III.

MY third propoſition is this; That from this book called the New Teſtament, may be collected a ſyſtem of ethics, in which every moral precept founded on reaſon is carried to a higher degree of purity and perfection, than in any other of the antient philoſophers of preceding ages; every moral precept founded on falſe principles is entirely omitted, and many new precepts added, peculiarly correſponding with the new object of this religion.

By moral precepts founded on reaſon, I mean all thoſe, which enforce

force the practice of ſuch duties as reaſon informs us muſt improve our natures, and conduce to the happineſs of mankind: ſuch are piety to God, benevolence to men, juſtice, charity, temperance, and ſobriety, with all thoſe, which prohibit the commiſſion of the contrary vices, all which debaſe our natures, and, by mutual injuries, introduce univerſal diſorder, and conſequently univerſal miſery. By precepts founded on falſe principles, I mean thoſe which recommend fictitious virtues productive of none of theſe ſalutary effects, and therefore, however celebrated and admired, are in fact no virtues

at all; ſuch are valour, patriotiſm, and friendſhip.

That virtues of the firſt kind are carried to a higher degree of purity and perfection by the Chriſtian religion than by any other, it is here unneceſſary to prove, becauſe this is a truth, which has been ſo frequently demonſtrated by her friends, and never once denied by the moſt determined of her adverſaries; but it will be proper to ſhew, that thoſe of the latter ſort are moſt judiciouſly omitted; becauſe they have really no intrinſic merit in them, and are totally incompatible with the genius and ſpirit of this inſtitution.

Valour,

Valour, for inſtance, or active courage, is for the moſt part conſtitutional, and therefore can have no more claim to moral merit, than wit, beauty, health, ſtrength, or any other endowment of the mind or body; and ſo far is it from producing any ſalutary effects, by introducing peace, order, or happineſs into ſociety, that it is the uſual perpetrator of all the violences, which from retaliated injuries diſtract the world with bloodſhed and devaſtation. It is the engine by which the ſtrong are enabled to plunder the weak, the proud to trample upon the humble, and the guilty to oppreſs the innocent; it is the chief inſtrument

which ambition employs in her unjuſt purſuits of wealth and power, and is therefore ſo much extolled by her votaries: it was indeed congenial with the religion of pagans, whoſe gods were for the moſt part made out of deceaſed heroes, exalted to heaven as a reward for the miſchiefs which they had perpetrated upon earth, and therefore with them this was the firſt of virtues, and had even engroſſed that denomination to itſelf; but whatever merit it may have aſſumed among Pagans, with Chriſtians it can pretend to none, and few or none are the occaſions in which they are permitted to exert it: they are ſo far from being allowed to inflict

evil,

evil, that they are forbid even to reſiſt it: they are ſo far from being encouraged to revenge injuries, that one of their firſt duties is to forgive them; ſo far from being incited to deſtroy their enemies, that they are commanded to love them, and to ſerve them to the utmoſt of their power. If Chriſtian nations therefore were nations of Chriſtians, all war would be impoſſible and unknown amongſt them, and valour could be neither of uſe nor eſtimation, and therefore could never have a place in the catalogue of Chriſtian virtues, being irreconcileable with all its precepts. I object not to the praiſe and honours beſtowed on the

valiant, they are the leaſt tribute which can be paid them by thoſe who enjoy ſafety and affluence by the intervention of their dangers and ſufferings: I aſſert only that active courage can never be a Chriſtian virtue, becauſe a Chriſtian can have nothing to do with it. Paſſive courage is indeed frequently, and properly inculcated by this meek and ſuffering religion, under the titles of patience and reſignation: a real and ſubſtantial virtue this, and a direct contraſt to the former; for paſſive courage ariſes from the nobleſt diſpoſitions of the human mind, from a contempt of misfortunes, pain, and death, and a confidence in the protection of the

the Almighty; active from the meaneſt: from paſſion, vanity, and ſelf-dependence: paſſive courage is derived from a zeal for truth, and a perſeverance in duty; active is the offſpring of pride and revenge, and the parent of cruelty and injuſtice: in ſhort, paſſive courage is the reſolution of a philoſopher, active the ferocity of a ſavage. Nor is this more incompatible with the precepts, than with the object of this religion, which is the attainment of the kingdom of heaven; for valour is not that ſort of violence, by which that kingdom is to be taken; nor are the turbulent ſpirits of heroes and conquerors admiſſible into thoſe

regions

regions of peace, ſubordination, and tranquillity

Patriotiſm alſo, that celebrated virtue ſo much practiſed in ancient, and ſo much profeſſed in modern times, that virtue, which ſo long preſerved the liberties of Greece, and exalted Rome to the empire of the world: this celebrated virtue, I ſay, muſt alſo be excluded; becauſe it not only falls ſhort of, but directly counteracts, the extenſive benevolence of this religion. A Chriſtian is of no country, he is a citizen of the world; and his neighbours and countrymen are the inhabitants of the remoteſt regions, whenever their diſtreſſes demand his friendly aſſiſtance: Chriſtianity commands

us to love all mankind, Patriotiſm to oppreſs all other countries to advance the imaginary proſperity of our own: Chriſtianity enjoins us to imitate the univerſal benevolence of our Creator, who pours forth his bleſſings on every nation upon earth; Patriotiſm to copy the mean partiality of an Engliſh pariſh officer, who thinks injuſtice and cruelty meritorious, whenever they promote the intereſts of his own inconſiderable village. This has ever been a favourite virtue with mankind, becauſe it conceals ſelf-intereſt under the maſk of public ſpirit, not only from others, but even from themſelves, and gives a licence to inflict

wrongs and injuries not only with impunity, but with applauſe; but it is ſo diametrically oppoſite to the great characteriſtic of this inſtitution, that it never could have been admitted into the liſt of Chriſtian virtues.

Friendſhip likewiſe, although more congenial to the principles of Chriſtianity, ariſing from more tender and amiable diſpoſitions, could never gain admittance amongſt her benevolent precepts for the ſame reaſon; becauſe it is too narrow and confined, and appropriates that benevolence to a ſingle object, which is here commanded to be extended over all: Where friendſhips ariſe from ſimilarity of ſentiments, and diſin-

diſintereſted affections, they are advantageous, agreeable, and innocent, but have little pretenſions to merit; for it is juſtly obſerved, "If ye love them, which love you, "what thanks have ye? for ſin-"ners alſo love thoſe, that love "them *." But if they are formed from alliances in parties, factions, and intereſts, or from a participation of vices, the uſual parents of what are called friendſhips among mankind, they are then both miſchievous and criminal, and conſequently forbidden, but in their utmoſt purity deſerve no recommendation from this religion.

* Luke vi. 32.

To the judicious omiſſion of theſe falſe virtues we may add that remarkable ſilence, which the Chriſtian Legiſlator every where preſerves on ſubjects eſteemed by all others of the higheſt importance, civil government, national policy, and the rights of war and peace; of theſe he has not taken the leaſt notice, probably for this plain reaſon, becauſe it would have been impoſſible to have formed any explicit regulations concerning them, which muſt not have been inconſiſtent with the purity of his religion, or with the practical obſervance of ſuch imperfect creatures as men ruling over, and contending with each other: For inſtance, had

had he abſolutely forbid all reſiſtance to the reigning powers, he had conſtituted a plan of deſpotiſm, and made men ſlaves; had he allowed it, he muſt have authorized diſobedience, and made them rebels: had he in direct terms prohibited all war, he muſt have left his followers for ever an eaſy prey to every infidel invader; had he permitted it, he muſt have licenſed all that rapine and murder, with which it is unavoidably attended.

Let us now examine what are thoſe new precepts in this religion peculiarly correſponding with the new object of it, that is preparing us for the kingdom of heaven: Of theſe the chief are poorneſs of ſpirit,

rit, forgiveneſs of injuries, and charity to all men; to theſe we may add repentance, faith, ſelf-abaſement, and a detachment from the world, all moral duties peculiar to this religion, and abſolutely neceſſary to the attainment of its end.

" Bleſſed are the poor in ſpirit; " for theirs is the kingdom of hea- " ven *:" By which poorneſs of ſpirit is to be underſtood a diſpoſition of mind, meek, humble, ſubmiſſive to power, void of ambition, patient of injuries, and free from all reſentment: This was ſo new, and ſo oppoſite to the ideas of all Pagan moraliſts, that they thought

* Matt. v. 3.

this

this temper of mind a criminal and contemptible meanneſs, which muſt induce men to ſacrifice the glory of their country, and their own honour, to a ſhameful puſillanimity; and ſuch it appears to almoſt all who are called Chriſtians even at this day, who not only reject it in practice, but diſavow it in principle, notwithſtanding this explicit declaration of their Maſter. We ſee them revenging the ſmalleſt affronts by premeditated murder, as individuals, on principles of honour; and, in their national capacities, deſtroying each other with fire and ſword, for the low conſiderations of commercial intereſts, the balance of

rival powers, or the ambition of princes: We ſee them with their laſt breath animating each other to a ſavage revenge, and, in the agonies of death, plunging with feeble arms their daggers into the hearts of their opponents: and, what is ſtill worſe, we hear all theſe barbariſms celebrated by hiſtorians, flattered by poets, applauded in theatres, approved in ſenates, and even ſanctified in pulpits. But univerſal practice cannot alter the nature of things, nor univerſal error change the nature of truth: Pride was not made for man, but humility, meekneſs, and reſignation, that is poorneſs of ſpirit, was made for man, and properly belongs to his dependent

dent and precarious ſituation; and is the only diſpoſition of mind, which can enable him to enjoy eaſe and quiet here, and happineſs hereafter: Yet was this important precept intirely unknown until it was promulgated by him, who ſaid, "Suffer little children to come "unto me, and forbid them not; "for of ſuch is the kingdom of "heaven: Verily I ſay unto you, "whoever ſhall not receive the "kingdom of God as a little child, "he ſhall not enter therein*."

Another precept, equally new and no leſs excellent, is forgiveneſs of injuries: "Ye have heard," ſays Chriſt to his diſciples,

* Matt. x. 14.

"Thou ſhalt love thy neighbour, "and hate thine enemy: but I "ſay unto you, love your enemies; "bleſs them that curſe you, do "good to them that hate you, "and pray for them which de- "ſpitefully uſe you and perſecute "you†." This was a leſſon ſo new, and ſo utterly unknown, till taught by his doctrines, and enforced by his example, that the wiſeſt moraliſts of the wiſeſt nations and ages repreſented the deſire of revenge as a mark of a noble mind, and the accompliſhment of it as one of the chief felicities attendant on a fortunate man. But how much more mag-

† Matt. v. 43.

nanimous,

nanimous, how much more beneficial to mankind, is forgiveneſs! it is more magnanimous, becauſe every generous and exalted diſpoſition of the human mind is requiſite to the practice of it: for theſe alone can enable us to bear the wrongs and inſults of wickedneſs and folly with patience, and to look down on the perpetrators of them with pity, rather than indignation; theſe alone can teach us, that ſuch are but a part of thoſe ſufferings allotted to us in this ſtate of probation, and to know, that to overcome evil with good, is the moſt glorious of all victories: it is the moſt beneficial, becauſe this amiable conduct alone

can put an end to an eternal ſucceſſion of injuries and retaliations; for every retaliation becomes a new injury, and requires another act of revenge for ſatisfaction. But would we obſerve this ſalutary precept, to love our enemies, and to do good to thoſe who deſpitefully uſe us, this obſtinate benevolence would at laſt conquer the moſt inveterate hearts, and we ſhould have no enemies to forgive. How much more exalted a character therefore is a Chriſtian martyr ſuffering with reſignation, and praying for the guilty, than that of a Pagan hero, breathing revenge, and deſtroying the innocent! Yet, noble and uſeful as

this

this virtue is, before the appearance of this religion it was not only unpractiſed, but decried in principle as mean and ignominious, though ſo obvious a remedy for moſt of the miſeries of this life, and ſo neceſſary a qualification for the happineſs of another.

A third precept, firſt noticed and firſt injoined by this inſtitution, is charity to all men. What this is, we may beſt learn from this admirable deſcription, painted in the following words; "Charity "ſuffereth long, and is kind; "charity envieth not; charity "vaunteth not itſelf; is not puffed "up; doth not behave itſelf un-

" ſeemly; ſeeketh not her own;
" is not eaſily provoked; thinketh
" no evil; rejoiceth not in ini-
" quity, but rejoiceth in truth;
" feareth all things, believeth all
" things; hopeth all things; en-
" dureth all things *." Here we have an accurate delineation of this bright conſtellation of all virtues; which conſiſts not, as many imagine, in the building of monaſteries, endowment of hoſpitals, or the diſtribution of alms; but in ſuch an amiable diſpoſition of mind, as exerciſes itſelf every hour in acts of kindneſs, patience, complacency, and benevolence to all around us, and which alone is

* 1 Cor. xiii. 4.

able

able to promote happineſs in the preſent life, or render us capable of receiving it in another: and yet this is totally new, and ſo it is declared to be by the author of it; "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye love one another; by this ſhall all men know that ye are my diſciples, if ye have love one to another*." This benevolent diſpoſition is made the great characteriſtic of a Chriſtian, the teſt of his obedience, and the mark by which he is to be diſtinguiſhed. This love for each other is that charity juſt now deſcribed, and

* John xiii. 34.

contains

contains all thoſe qualities, which are there attributed to it; humility, patience, meekneſs, and beneficence: without which we muſt live in perpetual diſcord, and conſequently cannot pay obedience to this commandment by loving one another; a commandment ſo ſublime, ſo rational, and ſo beneficial, ſo wiſely calculated to correct the depravity, diminiſh the wickedneſs, and abate the miſeries of human nature, that, did we univerſally comply with it, we ſhould ſoon be relieved from all the inquietudes ariſing from our own unruly paſſions, anger, envy, revenge, malice, and ambition, as well as from all thoſe injuries, to which

which we are perpetually expoſed from the indulgence of the ſame paſſions in others. It would alſo preſerve our minds in ſuch a ſtate of tranquillity, and ſo prepare them for the kingdom of heaven, that we ſhould ſlide out of a life of peace, love, and benevolence, into that celeſtial ſociety, by an almoſt imperceptible tranſition. Yet was this commandment intirely new, when given by him, who ſo intitles it, and has made it the capital duty of his religion, becauſe the moſt indiſpenſably neceſſary to the attainment of its great object the kingdom of heaven; into which, if proud, turbulent, and vindictive ſpirits were

permitted

permitted to enter, they muſt unavoidably deſtroy the happineſs of that ſtate by the operations of the ſame paſſions and vices, by which they diſturb the preſent, and therefore all ſuch muſt be eternally excluded, not only as a puniſhment, but alſo from incapacity.

Repentance, by this we plainly ſee, is another new moral duty ſtrenuouſly inſiſted on by this religion, and by no other, becauſe abſolutely neceſſary to the accompliſhment of its end; for this alone can purge us from thoſe tranſgreſſions, from which we cannot be totally exempted in this ſtate of trial and temptation, and purify us from

that

that depravity in our nature, which renders us incapable of attaining this end. Hence alſo we may learn, that no repentance can remove this incapacity, but ſuch as intirely changes the nature and diſpoſition of the offender; which in the language of Scripture is called "be-" ing born again." Mere contrition for paſt crimes, nor even the pardon of them, cannot effect this, unleſs it operates to this intire converſion or new birth, as it is properly and emphatically named: for ſorrow can no more purify a mind corrupted by a long continuance in vicious habits, than it can reſtore health to a body diſtemper-

ed

ed by a long courſe of vice and intemperance. Hence alſo every one, who is in the leaſt acquainted with himſelf, may judge of the reaſonableneſs of the hope that is in him, and of his ſituation in a future ſtate by that of his preſent. If he feels in himſelf a temper proud, turbulent, vindictive, and malevolent, and a violent attachment to the pleaſures or buſineſs of the world, he may be aſſured that he muſt be excluded from the kingdom of heaven; not only becauſe his conduct can merit no ſuch reward, but becauſe, if admitted, he would find there no objects ſatisfactory to his paſſions, inclinations, and purſuits,

and

and therefore could only diſturb the happineſs of others without enjoying any ſhare of it himſelf.

Faith is another moral duty injoined by this inſtitution, of a ſpecies ſo new, that the philoſophers of antiquity had no word expreſſive of this idea, nor any ſuch idea to be expreſſed; for the word πιστις or *fides*, which we tranſlate faith, was never uſed by any pagan writer in a ſenſe the leaſt ſimilar to that, to which it is applied in the New Teſtament: where in general it ſignifies an humble, teachable, and candid diſpoſition, a truſt in God, and confidence in his promiſes; when applied particularly to Chriſtianity, it

it means no more than a belief of this ſingle propoſition, that Chriſt was the ſon of God; that is, in the language of thoſe writings, the Meſſiah, who was foretold by the prophets, and expected by the Jews; who was ſent by God into the world to preach righteouſneſs, judgment, and everlaſting life, and to die as an atonement for the ſins of mankind. This was all that Chriſt required to be believed by thoſe who were willing to become his diſciples; he, who does not believe this, is not a Chriſtian, and he who does, believes the whole that is eſſential to his profeſſion, and all that is properly comprehended under the name of faith.

This

This unfortunate word has indeed been ſo tortured and ſo miſapplied to mean every abſurdity, which artifice could impoſe upon ignorance, that it has loſt all pretenſions to the title of virtue; but if brought back to the ſimplicity of its original ſignification, it well deſerves that name, becauſe it uſually ariſes from the moſt amiable diſpoſitions, and is always a direct contraſt to pride, obſtinacy, and ſelf-conceit. If taken in the extenſive ſenſe of an aſſent to the evidence of things not ſeen, it comprehends the exiſtence of a God, and a future ſtate, and is therefore not only itſelf a moral virtue, but the ſource from whence

all others muſt proceed; for on the belief of theſe all religion and morality muſt intirely depend. It cannot be altogether void of moral merit, (as ſome would repreſent it) becauſe it is in a degree voluntary; for daily experience ſhews us, that men not only pretend to, but actually do believe, and diſbelieve almoſt any propoſitions, which beſt ſuit their intereſts, or inclinations, and unfeignedly change their ſincere opinions with their ſituations and circumſtances. For we have power over the mind's eye, as well as over the body's, to ſhut it againſt the ſtrongeſt rays of truth and religion, whenever they become painful to us, and to open

it again to the faint glimmerings of ſcepticiſm and infidelity when we "love darkneſs rather than light, "becauſe our deeds are evil*." And this, I think, ſufficiently refutes all objections to the moral nature of faith, drawn from the ſuppoſition of its being quite involuntary, and neceſſarily dependant on the degree of evidence, which is offered to our underſtandings.

Self-abaſement is another moral duty inculcated by this religion only; which requires us to impute even our own virtues to the grace and favour of our Creator, and to acknowledge, that we can do nothing good by our own powers, un-

* John iii. 19.

all others muſt proceed; for on the belief of theſe all religion and morality muſt intirely depend. It cannot be altogether void of moral merit, (as ſome would repreſent it) becauſe it is in a degree voluntary; for daily experience ſhews us, that men not only pretend to, but actually do believe, and diſbelieve almoſt any propoſitions, which beſt ſuit their intereſts, or inclinations, and unfeignedly change their ſincere opinions with their ſituations and circumſtances. For we have power over the mind's eye, as well as over the body's, to ſhut it againſt the ſtrongeſt rays of truth and religion, whenever they become painful to us, and to open

it again to the faint glimmerings of ſcepticiſm and infidelity when we "love darkneſs rather than light, "becauſe our deeds are evil*." And this, I think, ſufficiently refutes all objections to the moral nature of faith, drawn from the ſuppoſition of its being quite involuntary, and neceſſarily dependant on the degree of evidence, which is offered to our underſtandings.

Self-abaſement is another moral duty inculcated by this religion only; which requires us to impute even our own virtues to the grace and favour of our Creator, and to acknowledge, that we can do nothing good by our own powers, un-

* John iii. 19.

leſs aſſiſted by his over-ruling influence: This doctrine ſeems at firſt ſight to infringe on our free-will, and to deprive us of all merit; but, on a cloſer examination, the truth of it may be demonſtrated both by reaſon and experience, and that in fact it does not impair the one or depreciate the other: and that it is productive of ſo much humility, reſignation, and dependance on God, that it juſtly claims a place amongſt the moſt illuſtrious moral virtues. Yet was this duty utterly repugnant to the proud and ſelf-ſufficient principles of the antient philoſophers as well as modern Deiſts, and therefore before the publication of the goſpel totally

totally unknown and uncomprehended.

Detachment from the world is another moral virtue conſtituted by this religion alone: ſo new, that even at this day few of its profeſſors can be perſuaded, that it is required, or that it is any virtue at all. By this detachment from the world is not to be underſtood a ſecluſion from ſociety, abſtraction from all buſineſs, or retirement to a gloomy cloyſter. Induſtry and labour, chearfulneſs and hoſpitality, are frequently recommended: nor is the acquiſition of wealth and honours prohibited, if they can be obtained by honeſt means, and a moderate degree of

attention and care: but ſuch an unremitted anxiety, and perpetual application as engroſſes our whole time and thoughts, are forbid, becauſe they are incompatible with the ſpirit of this religion, and muſt utterly diſqualify us for the attainment of its great end. We toil on in the vain purſuits and frivolous occupations of the world, die in our harneſs, and then expect, if no gigantic crime ſtands in the way, to ſtep immediately into the kingdom of heaven: but this is impoſſible; for without a previous detachment from the buſineſs of this world, we cannot be prepared for the happineſs of another. Yet this could make no part

of

of the morality of Pagans, becauſe their virtues were altogether connected with this buſineſs, and conſiſted chiefly in conducting it with honour to themſelves, and benefit to the public: But Chriſtianity has a nobler object in view, which, if not attended to, muſt be loſt for ever. This object is that celeſtial manſion of which we ſhould never loſe ſight, and to which we ſhould be ever advancing during our journey thro' life: but this by no means precludes us from performing the buſineſs, or enjoying the amuſements of travellers, provided they detain us not too long, or lead us too far out of our way.

It cannot be denied, that the great author of the Chriſtian inſtitution, firſt and ſingly ventured to oppoſe all the chief principles of Pagan virtue, and to introduce a religion directly oppoſite to thoſe erroneous though long-eſtabliſhed opinions, both in its duties and in its object. The moſt celebrated virtues of the antients were high ſpirit, intrepid courage, and implacable reſentment.

Impiger, iracundus, inexorabilis, acer,

was the portrait of the moſt illuſtrious Hero, drawn by one of the firſt poets of antiquity: To all theſe admired qualities, thoſe of a true Chriſtian are an exact contraſt; for this religion conſtantly injoins

injoins poorneſs of ſpirit, meekneſs, patience, and forgiveneſs of injuries. "But I ſay unto you, "that ye reſiſt not evil; but whoever ſhall ſmite thee on the "right cheek, turn to him the "other, alſo*." The favourite characters among the Pagans were the turbulent, ambitious, and intrepid, who through toils and dangers acquired wealth, and ſpent it in luxury magnificence, and corruption; but both theſe are equally adverſe to the Chriſtian ſyſtem, which forbids all extraordinary efforts to obtain wealth, care to ſecure, or thought concerning the enjoyment of it. "Lay

* Matt. v. 39.

"not

"not up for yourſelves treaſures "on earth, &c." "Take no "thought, ſaying, what ſhall we "eat, or what ſhall we drink, or "wherewithal ſhall we be cloath-"ed? for after all theſe things do "the Gentiles ſeek *." The chief object of the Pagans was immortal fame: for this their poets ſang, their heroes fought, and their patriots died; and this was hung out by their philoſophers and legiſlators, as the great incitement to all noble and virtuous deeds. But what ſays the Chriſtian Legiſlator to his diſciples on this ſubject? "Bleſſed are ye, when "men ſhall revile you, and ſhall

* Matt. vi. 31.

"ſay

" ſay all manner of evil againſt " you for my ſake; rejoice, and " be exceeding glad, for great is " your reward in heaven *." So widely different is the genius of the Pagan and Chriſtian morality, that I will venture to affirm, that the moſt celebrated virtues of the former are more oppoſite to the ſpirit, and more inconſiſtent with the end of the latter, than even their moſt infamous vices; and that a Brutus wrenching vengeance out of his hands to whom alone it belongs, by murdering the oppreſſor of his country, or a Cato murdering himſelf from an impatience of controul, leaves the world more

* Matt. v. 11.

unqualified

unqualified for, and more inadmiſſible into the kingdom of heaven, than even a Meſſalina, or an Heliogabalus, with all their profligacy about them.

Nothing, I believe, has ſo much contributed to corrupt the true ſpirit of the Chriſtian inſtitution, as that partiality, which we contract from our earlieſt education for the manners of Pagan antiquity: from whence we learn to adopt every moral idea, which is repugnant to it; to applaud falſe virtues, which that diſavows; to be guided by laws of honour, which that abhors; to imitate characters, which that deteſts; and to behold heroes, patriots, conquerors, and ſuicides

ſuicides with admiration, whoſe conduct that utterly condemns. From a coalition of theſe oppoſite principles was generated that monſtrous ſyſtem of cruelty and benevolence, of barbariſm and civility, of rapine and juſtice, of fighting and devotion, of revenge and generoſity, which harraſſed the world for ſeveral centuries with cruſades, holy wars, knight-errantry, and ſingle combats, and even ſtill retains influence enough, under the name of honour, to defeat the moſt beneficent ends of this holy inſtitution. I mean not by this to paſs any cenſure on the principles of valour, patriotiſm, or honour: they may be uſeful, and

perhaps

perhaps neceſſary in the commerce and buſineſs of the preſent turbulent and imperfect ſtate; and thoſe who are actuated by them may be virtuous, honeſt, and even religious men: all that I aſſert is, that they cannot be Chriſtians: A profligate may be a Chriſtian, though a bad one, becauſe he may be overpowered by paſſions and temptations, and his actions may contradict his principles; but a man whoſe ruling principle is honour, however virtuous he may be, cannot be a Chriſtian, becauſe he erects a ſtandard of duty, and deliberately adheres to it, diametrically oppoſite to the whole tenour of that religion.

The

The contraſt between the Chriſtian, and all other inſtitutions religious or moral, previous to its appearance, is ſufficiently evident, and ſurely the ſuperiority of the former is as little to be diſputed; unleſs any one ſhall undertake to prove, that humility, patience, forgiveneſs, and benevolence are leſs amiable, and leſs beneficial qualities, than pride, turbulence, revenge, and malignity: that the contempt of riches is leſs noble, than the acquiſition by fraud and villainy, or the diſtribution of them to the poor leſs commendable than avarice or profuſion; or that a real immortality in the kingdom of heaven is an object leſs exalted,

leſs

leſs rational, and leſs worthy of purſuit, than an imaginary immortality in the applauſe of men: that worthleſs tribute, which the folly of one part of mankind pays to the wickedneſs of the other; a tribute, which a wiſe man ought always to deſpiſe, becauſe a good man can ſcarce ever obtain.

CON-

CONCLUSION.

IF I miſtake not, I have now fully eſtabliſhed the truth of my three propoſitions.

Firſt, That there is now extant a book intitled the New Teſtament.

Secondly, That from this book may be extracted a ſyſtem of religion intirely new; both in its object, and its doctrines, not only ſuperior to, but totally unlike every thing, which had ever before entered into the mind of man.

Thirdly, That from this book may likewiſe be collected a ſyſtem

of ethics, in which every moral precept founded on reaſon is carried to a higher degree of purity and perfection, than in any other of the wiſeſt philoſophers of preceding ages; every moral precept founded on falſe principles totally omitted, and many new precepts added, peculiarly correſponding with the new object of this religion.

Every one of theſe propoſitions, I am perſuaded, is incontrovertibly true; and if true, this ſhort, but certain concluſion muſt inevitably follow; That ſuch a ſyſtem of religion and morality could not poſſibly have been the work of any man, or ſet of men, much

leſs

leſs of thoſe obſcure, ignorant, and illiterate perſons, who actually did diſcover, and publiſh it to the world; and that therefore it muſt have been effected by the ſupernatural interpoſition of divine power and wiſdom; that is, that it muſt derive its origin from God.

This argument ſeems to me little ſhort of demonſtration, and is indeed founded on the very ſame reaſoning by which the material world is proved to be the work of his inviſible hand. We view with admiration the heavens and the earth, and all therein contained; we contemplate with amazement the minute bodies of animals too

ſmall for perception, and the immenſe planetary orbs too vaſt for imagination: We are certain that theſe cannot be the works of man; and therefore we conclude with reaſon, that they muſt be the productions of an omnipotent Creator. In the ſame manner we ſee here a ſcheme of religion and morality unlike and ſuperior to all ideas of the human mind, equally impoſſible to have been diſcovered by the knowledge, as invented by the artifice of man; and therefore by the very ſame mode of reaſoning, and with the ſame juſtice, we conclude, that it muſt derive its origin from the ſame omnipotent and omniſcient Being.

Nor

Nor was the propagation of this religion leſs extraordinary than the religion itſelf, or leſs above the reach of all human power, than the diſcovery of it was above that of all human underſtanding. It is well known, that in the courſe of a very few years it was ſpread over all the principal parts of Aſia and of Europe, and this by the miniſtry only of an inconſiderable number of the moſt inconſiderable perſons; that at this time Paganiſm was in the higheſt repute, believed univerſally by the vulgar, and patroniſed by the great; that the wiſeſt men of the wiſeſt nations aſſiſted at its ſacrifices, and conſulted its oracles on the moſt

important occaſions: Whether theſe were the tricks of the prieſts or of the devil, is of no conſequence, as they were both equally unlikely to be converted, or overcome; the fact is certain, that on the preaching of a few fiſhermen, their altars were deſerted, and their deities were dumb. This miracle they undoubtedly performed, whatever we may think of the reſt: and this is ſurely ſufficient to prove the authority of their commiſſion; and to convince us, that neither their undertaking nor the execution of it could poſſibly be their own.

How much this divine inſtitution has been corrupted, or how ſoon

ſoon theſe corruptions began, how far it has been diſcoloured by the falſe notions of illiterate ages, or blended with fictions by pious frauds, or how early theſe notions and fictions were introduced, no learning or ſagacity is now able preciſely to aſcertain; but ſurely no man, who ſeriouſly conſiders the excellence and novelty of its doctrines, the manner in which it was at firſt propagated through the world, the perſons who atchieved that wonderful work, and the originality of thoſe writings in which it is ſtill recorded, can poſſibly believe that it could ever have been the production of impoſture, or chance; or that from

an impoſture the moſt wicked and blaſphemous, (for if an impoſture, ſuch it is,) all the religion and virtue now exiſting on earth can derive their ſource.

But notwithſtanding what has been here urged, if any man can believe, that at a time when the literature of Greece and Rome, then in their meridian luſtre, were inſufficient for the taſk, the ſon of a carpenter, together with twelve of the meaneſt and moſt illiterate mechanics, his aſſociates, unaſſiſted by any ſupernatural power, ſhould be able to diſcover or invent a ſyſtem of theology the moſt ſublime, and of ethics the moſt perfect, which had eſcaped the penetration

tration and learning of Plato, Ariſtotle, and Cicero; and that from this ſyſtem, by their own ſagacity, they had excluded every falſe virtue, though univerſally admired, and admitted every true virtue, though deſpiſed and ridiculed by all the reſt of the world: If any one can believe that theſe men could become impoſtors, for no other purpoſe than the propagation of truth, villains for no end but to teach honeſty, and martyrs without the leaſt proſpect of honour or advantage; or that, if all this ſhould have been poſſible, theſe few inconſiderable perſons ſhould have been able, in the courſe of a few years, to have ſpread this

their

their religion over moſt parts of the then known world, in oppoſition to the intereſts, pleaſures, ambition, prejudices, and even reaſon of mankind; to have triumphed over the power of princes, the intrigues of ſtates, the force of cuſtom, the blindneſs of zeal, the influence of prieſts, the arguments of orators, and the philoſophy of the world, without any ſupernatural aſſiſtance; if any one can believe all theſe miraculous events, contradictory to the conſtant experience of the powers and diſpoſitions of human nature, he muſt be poſſeſſed of much more faith than is neceſſary to make him a Chriſtian, and remain

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an unbeliever from mere credulity.

But ſhould theſe credulous infidels after all be in the right, and this pretended revelation be all a fable; from believing it what harm could enſue? Would it render princes more tyrannical, or ſubjects more ungovernable? the rich more inſolent, or the poor more diſorderly? Would it make worſe parents or children, huſbands or wives, maſters or ſervants, friends or neighbours? Or would it not make men more virtuous, and conſequently more happy in every ſituation? It could not be criminal; it could not be detrimental. It could not be criminal, becauſe

it

it cannot be a crime to aſſent to ſuch evidence, as has been able to convince the beſt and wiſeſt of mankind; by which, if falſe, Providence muſt have permitted men to deceive each other for the moſt beneficial ends, and which therefore it would be ſurely more meritorious to believe, from a diſpoſition of faith and charity, which believeth all things, than to reject with ſcorn from obſtinacy and ſelf-conceit: It cannot be detrimental, becauſe if Chriſtianity is a fable, it is a fable, the belief of which is the only principle which can retain men in a ſteady and uniform courſe of virtue, piety, and devotion, or can ſupport them

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in the hour of diſtreſs, of ſickneſs, and of death. Whatever might be the operations of true deiſm on the minds of Pagan philoſophers, that can now avail us nothing: for that light which once lightened the gentiles, is now abſorbed in the brighter illumination of the goſpel; we can now form no rational ſyſtem of deiſm, but what muſt be borrowed from that ſource, and, as far as it reaches towards perfection, muſt be exactly the ſame; and therefore if we will not accept of Chriſtianity, we can have no religion at all. Accordingly we ſee, that thoſe who fly from this, ſcarce ever ſtop at deiſm; but haſten on with great alacrity to a total rejection

jection of all religious and moral principles whatever.

If I have here demonſtrated the divine origin of the Chriſtian religion by an argument which cannot be confuted; no others, however plauſible or numerous, founded on probabilities, doubts, and conjectures, can ever diſprove it, becauſe if it is once ſhewn to be true, it cannot be falſe. But as many arguments of this kind have bewildered ſome candid and ingenuous minds, I ſhall here beſtow a few lines on thoſe which have the moſt weight, in order to wipe out, or at leaſt to diminiſh their perplexing influence.

But here I muſt previouſly obſerve,

ſerve, that the moſt unſurmountable, as well as the moſt uſual obſtacle to our belief, ariſes from our paſſions, appetites, and intereſts; for faith being an act of the will as much as of the underſtanding, we oftener diſbelieve for want of inclination, than want of evidence. The firſt ſtep towards thinking this revelation true, is our hopes that it is ſo; for whenever we much wiſh any propoſition to be true, we are not far from believing it. It is certainly for the intereſt of all good men, that its authority ſhould be well founded; and ſtill more beneficial to the bad, if ever they intend to be better: becauſe it is the only

ſyſtem

ſyſtem either of reaſon or religion which can give them any aſſurance of pardon. The puniſhment of vice is a debt due to juſtice, which cannot be remitted without compenſation: repentance can be no compenſation; it may change a wicked man's diſpoſitions, and prevent his offending for the future, but can lay no claim to pardon for what is paſt. If any one by profligacy and extravagance contracts a debt, repentance may make him wiſer, and hinder him from running into further diſtreſſes, but can never pay off his old bonds; for which he muſt be ever accountable, unleſs they are diſcharged by himſelf, or ſome other

other in his ſtead: this very diſcharge Chriſtianity alone holds forth on our repentance, and, if true, will certainly perform: the truth of it therefore muſt ardently be wiſhed for by all, except the wicked, who are determined neither to repent or reform. It is well worth every man's while, who either is, or intends to be virtuous, to believe Chriſtianity, if he can; becauſe he will find it the ſureſt preſervative againſt all vitious habits and their attendant evils, the beſt reſource under diſtreſſes and diſappointments, ill health and ill fortune, and the firmeſt baſis on which contemplation can reſt; and without ſome, the

human mind is never perfectly at eaſe. But if any one is attached to a favourite pleaſure, or eagerly engaged in worldly purſuits incompatible with the precepts of this religion, and he believes it, he muſt either relinquiſh thoſe purſuits with uneaſineſs, or perſiſt in them with remorſe and diſſatisfaction, and therefore muſt commence unbeliever in his own defence. With ſuch I ſhall not diſpute, nor pretend to perſuade men by arguments to make themſelves miſerable: but to thoſe, who, not afraid that this religion may be true, are really affected by ſuch objections, I will offer the following anſwers,

which,

which, though ſhort, will, I doubt not, be ſufficient to ſhew them their weakneſs and futility.

In the firſt place, then, ſome have been ſo bold as to ſtrike at the root of all revelation from God, by aſſerting, that it is incredible, becauſe unneceſſary, and unneceſſary, becauſe the reaſon which he has beſtowed on mankind is ſufficiently able to diſcover all the religious and moral duties which he requires of them, if they would but attend to her precepts, and be guided by her friendly admonitions. Mankind have undoubtedly at various times from the remoteſt ages received ſo much knowledge by divine communications, and

have ever been ſo much inclined to impute it all to their own ſufficiency, that it is now difficult to determine what human reaſon unaſſiſted can effect: But to form a true judgment on this ſubject, let us turn our eyes to thoſe remote regions of the globe, to which this ſupernatural aſſiſtance has never yet extended, and we ſhall there ſee men endued with ſenſe and reaſon not inferior to our own, ſo far from being capable of forming ſyſtems of religion and morality, that they are at this day totally unable to make a nail or a hatchet: from whence we may ſurely be convinced, that reaſon alone is ſo far from being ſufficient to offer

to mankind a perfect religion, that it has never yet been able to lead them to any degree of culture, or civilization whatever. These have uniformly flowed from that great fountain of divine communication opened in the east, in the earliest ages, and thence been gradually diffused in salubrious streams, throughout the various regions of the earth. Their rise and progress, by surveying the history of the world, may easily be traced backwards to their source; and wherever these have not as yet been able to penetrate, we there find the human species not only void of all true religious and moral sentiments, but not the least emerged

from their original ignorance and barbarity; which ſeems a demonſtration, that although human reaſon is capable of progreſſion in ſcience, yet the firſt foundations muſt be laid by ſupernatural inſtructions: for ſurely no other probable cauſe can be aſſigned, why one part of mankind ſhould have made ſuch an amazing progreſs in religious, moral, metaphyſical, and philoſophical enquiries; ſuch wonderful improvements in policy, legiſlation, commerce, and manufactures, while the other part, formed with the ſame natural capacities, and divided only by ſeas and mountains, ſhould remain, during the ſame number of ages, in a ſtate

a ſtate little ſuperior to brutes, without government, without laws or letters, and even without clothes and habitations; murdering each other to ſatiate their revenge, and devouring each other to appeaſe their hunger: I ſay no cauſe can be aſſigned for this amazing difference, except that the firſt have received information from thoſe divine communications recorded in the ſcriptures, and the latter have never yet been favoured with ſuch aſſiſtance. This remarkable contraſt ſeems an unanſwerable, though perhaps a new proof of the neceſſity of revelation, and a ſolid refutation of all arguments againſt it, drawn from the ſufficiency of

human reaſon. And as reaſon in her natural ſtate is thus incapable of making any progreſs in knowledge; ſo when furniſhed with materials by ſupernatural aid, if left to the guidance of her own wild imaginations, ſhe falls into more numerous, and more groſs errors, than her own native ignorance could ever have ſuggeſted. There is then no abſurdity ſo extravagant, which ſhe is not ready to adopt: ſhe has perſuaded ſome, that there is no God; others, that there can be no future ſtate: ſhe has taught ſome, that there is no difference between vice and virtue, and that to cut a man's throat and to relieve his neceſſities are actions equally meritorious:

torious: ſhe has convinced many, that they have no free-will in oppoſition to their own experience; ſome, that there can be no ſuch thing as ſoul, or ſpirit, contrary to their own perceptions; and others, no ſuch thing as matter or body, in contradiction to their ſenſes. By analyſing all things ſhe can ſhew, that there is nothing in any thing; by perpetual ſifting ſhe can reduce all exiſtence to the inviſible duſt of ſcepticiſm; and by recurring to firſt principles, prove to the ſatisfaction of her followers, that there are no principles at all. How far ſuch a guide is to be depended on in the important concerns of religion, and morals, I leave to the judgment of every

every conſiderate man to determine. This is certain, that human reaſon in its higheſt ſtate of cultivation amongſt the philoſophers of Greece and Rome, was never able to form a religion comparable to Chriſtianity; nor have all thoſe ſources of moral virtue, ſuch as truth, beauty, and the fitneſs of things, which modern philoſophers have endeavoured to ſubſtitute in its ſtead, ever been effectual to produce good men, and have themſelves often been the productions of ſome of the worſt.

Others there are, who allow, that a revelation from God may be both neceſſary, and credible; but alledge, that the ſcriptures, that is the

the books of the Old and New Teſtament, cannot be that Revelation; becauſe in them are to be found errors and inconſiſtencies, fabulous ſtories, falſe facts, and falſe philoſophy; which can never be derived from the fountain of all wiſdom and truth. To this I reply, that I readily acknowledge, that the ſcriptures are not revelations from God, but the hiſtory of them: The revelation itſelf is derived from God; but the hiſtory of it is the production of men, and therefore the truth of it is not in the leaſt affected by their fallibility, but depends on the internal evidence of its own ſupernatural excellence. If in theſe books ſuch a

religion,

religion, as has been here deſcribed, actually exiſts, no ſeeming, or even real defects to be found in them can diſprove the divine origin of this religion, or invalidate my argument. Let us, for inſtance, grant that the Moſaic hiſtory of the creation was founded on the erroneous but popular principles of thoſe early ages, who imagined the earth to be a vaſt plain, and the celeſtial bodies no more than luminaries hung up in the concave firmament to enlighten it; will it from thence follow, that Moſes could not be a proper inſtrument in the hands of Providence, to impart to the Jews a divine law, becauſe he was not inſpired with a fore-

fore-knowledge of the Copernican and Newtonian ſyſtems? or that Chriſt muſt be an impoſtor, becauſe Moſes was not an aſtronomer? Let us alſo ſuppoſe, that the accounts of Chriſt's temptation in the wilderneſs, the devil's taking refuge in the herd of ſwine, with ſeveral other narrations in the New Teſtament, frequently ridiculed by unbelievers, were all but ſtories accommodated to the ignorance and ſuperſtitions of the times and countries in which they were written, or pious frauds intended to impreſs on vulgar minds a higher reverence of the power and ſanctity of Chriſt; will this in the leaſt impeach the excellence of his religion,

ligion, or the authority of its founder? or is Chriſtianity anſwerable for all the fables of which it may have been the innocent occaſion? The want of this obvious diſtinction has much injured the Chriſtian cauſe; becauſe on this ground it has ever been moſt ſucceſsfully attacked, and on this ground it is not eaſily to be defended: for if the records of this revelation are ſuppoſed to be the revelation itſelf, the leaſt defect diſcovered in them muſt be fatal to the whole. What has led many to overlook this diſtinction, is that common phraſe, that the ſcriptures are the word of God; and in one ſenſe they certainly are; that is, they are the ſacred

ſacred repoſitory of all the revelations, diſpenſations, promiſes, and precepts, which God has vouchſafed to communicate to mankind; but by this expreſſion we are not to underſtand, that every part of this voluminous collection of hiſtorical, poetical, prophetical, theological, and moral writings, which we call the Bible, was dictated by the immediate influence of divine inſpiration: The authors of theſe books pretend to no ſuch infallibility, and if they claim it not for themſelves, who has authority to claim it for them? Chriſt required no ſuch belief from thoſe who were willing to be his diſciples. He ſays, "He "that believeth on me, hath ever-

"laſting

"lasting life*;" but where does he say, He that believeth not every word contained in the Old Testament, which was then extant, or every word in the New Testament, which was to be wrote for the instruction of future generations, hath not everlasting life? There are innumerable occurrences related in the scriptures, some of greater, some of less, and some of no importance at all; the truth of which we can have no reason to question, but the belief of them is surely not essential to the faith of a Christian: I have no doubt but that St. Paul was shipwrecked, and that he left his cloak

* John vi. 47.

and

and his parchments at Troas; but the belief of theſe facts makes no part of Chriſtianity, nor is the truth of them any proof of its authority. It proves only that this apoſtle could not in common life be under the perpetual influence of infallible inſpiration; for, had he been ſo, he would not have put to ſea before a ſtorm, nor have forgot his cloak. Theſe writers were undoubtedly directed by ſupernatural influence in all things neceſſary to the great work, which they were appointed to perform: At particular times, and on particular occaſions, they were enabled to utter prophecies, to ſpeak languages, and to work miracles; but in all other

circumſtances, they ſeem to have been left to the direction of their own underſtandings, like other men. In the ſciences of hiſtory, geography, aſtronomy, and philoſophy, they appear to have been no better inſtructed than others, and therefore were not leſs liable to be miſled by the errors and prejudices of the times and countries in which they lived. They related facts like honeſt men, to the beſt of their knowledge or information, and they recorded the divine leſſons of their maſter with the utmoſt fidelity; but they pretended to no infallibility, for they ſometimes differed in their relations, and they ſometimes diſ-

agreed

agreed in their ſentiments. All which proves only, that they did not act, or write, in a combination to deceive, but not in the leaſt impeaches the truth of the revelation which they publiſhed; which depends not on any external evidence whatever: For I will venture to affirm, that if any one could prove, what is impoſſible to be proved, becauſe it is not true, that there are errors in geography, chronology, and philoſophy, in every page of the Bible; that the prophecies therein delivered are all but fortunate gueſſes, or artful applications, and the miracles there recorded no better than legendary tales: if any one could ſhew, that

theſe books were never written by their pretended authors, but were poſterior impoſitions on illiterate and credulous ages: all theſe wonderful diſcoveries would prove no more than this, that God, for reaſons to us unknown, had thought proper to permit a revelation by him communicated to mankind, to be mixed with their ignorance, and corrupted by their frauds from its earlieſt infancy, in the ſame manner in which he has viſibly permitted it to be mixed, and corrupted from that period to the preſent hour. If in theſe books a religion ſuperior to all human imagination actually exiſts, it is of no conſequence to the proof of

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its divine origin, by what means it was there introduced, or with what human errors and imperfections it is blended. A diamond, though found in a bed of mud, is ſtill a diamond, nor can the dirt, which ſurrounds it, depreciate its value or deſtroy its luſtre.

To ſome ſpeculative and refined obſervers, it has appeared incredible, that a wiſe and benevolent Creator ſhould have conſtituted a world upon one plan, and a religion for it on another; that is, that he ſhould have revealed a religion to mankind, which not only contradicts the principal paſſions and inclinations which he has implanted in their natures, but

is incompatible with the whole œconomy of that world which he has created, and in which he has thought proper to place them. This, ſay they, with regard to the Chriſtian is apparently the caſe: the love of power, riches, honour, and fame, are the great incitements to generous and magnanimous actions; yet by this inſtitution are all theſe depreciated and diſcouraged. Government is eſſential to the nature of man, and cannot be managed without certain degrees of violence, corruption, and impoſition; yet are all theſe ſtrictly forbid. Nations cannot ſubſiſt without wars, nor war be carried on without rapine,

pine, deſolation, and murder; yet are theſe prohibited under the ſevereſt threats. The non-reſiſtance of evil muſt ſubject individuals to continual oppreſſions, and leave nations a defenceleſs prey to their enemies; yet is this recommended. Perpetual patience under inſults and injuries muſt every day provoke new inſults and new injuries; yet is this injoined. A neglect of all we eat and drink and wear, muſt put an end to all commerce, manufactures, and induſtry; yet is this required. In ſhort, were theſe precepts univerſally obeyed, the diſpoſition of all human affairs muſt be intirely changed, and the buſineſs of the

world, conſtituted as it now is, could not go on. To all this I anſwer, that ſuch indeed is the chriſtian revelation, though ſome of its advocates may perhaps be unwilling to own it, and ſuch it is conſtantly declared to be by him who gave it, as well as by thoſe, who publiſhed it under his immediate direction: To theſe he ſays, "If ye were of the world, the "world would love his own; but "becauſe ye are not of the world, "but I have choſen you out of "the world, therefore the world "hateth you *." To the Jews he declares, "Ye are of this world; "I am not of this world †." St. Paul writes to the Romans,

* John xv. 19. † John viii. 23.

"Be

" Be not conformed to this " world *;" and to the Corinthians, " We ſpeak not the " wiſdom of this world †." St. James ſays, " Know ye not, that " the friendſhip of the world is " enmity with God? whoſoever " therefore will be a friend of the " world is the enemy of God ‡." This irreconcileable diſagreement between chriſtianity and the world is announced in numberleſs other places in the New Teſtament, and indeed by the whole tenour of thoſe writings. Theſe are plain declarations, which, in ſpite of all the evaſions of thoſe good managers, who chooſe to take a little

* Rom. xii. 2. † 1 Cor. ii. 6. ‡ Jam. iv. 4.

of

of this world in their way to heaven, ſtand fixed and immoveable againſt all their arguments drawn from public benefit and pretended neceſſity, and muſt ever forbid any reconciliation between the purſuits of this world and the chriſtian inſtitution: But they who reject it on this account, enter not into the ſublime ſpirit of this religion, which is not a code of preciſe laws deſigned for the well-ordering ſociety, adapted to the ends of worldly convenience, and amenable to the tribunal of human prudence; but a divine leſſon of purity and perfection, ſo far ſuperior to the low conſiderations of conqueſt, government, and commerce,

merce, that it takes no more notice of them, than of the battles of game-cocks, the policy of bees, or the induſtry of ants: they recollect not what is the firſt and principal object of this inſtitution; that this is not, as has been often repeated, to make us happy, or even virtuous in the preſent life, for the ſake of augmenting our happineſs here, but to conduct us through a ſtate of dangers and ſufferings, of ſin and temptation, in ſuch a manner as to qualify us for the enjoyment of happineſs hereafter. All other inſtitutions of religion and morals were made for the world, but the characteriſtic of this is to be againſt it; and therefore

therefore the merits of chriſtian doctrines are not to be weighed in the ſcales of public utility, like thoſe of moral precepts, becauſe worldly utility is not their end. If Chriſt and his apoſtles had pretended, that the religion which they preached would advance the power, wealth, and proſperity of nations, or of men, they would have deſerved but little credit; but they conſtantly profeſs the contrary, and every where declare, that their religion is adverſe to the world, and all its purſuits. Chriſt ſays, ſpeaking of his diſciples, "They are not of the world, even "as I am not of the world*." It

* John xvii. 16.

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can therefore be no imputation on this religion, or on any of its precepts, that they tend not to an end which their author profeſſedly diſclaims: nor can it ſurely be deemed a defect, that it is adverſe to the vain purſuits of this world; for ſo are reaſon, wiſdom, and experience; they all teach us the ſame leſſon, they all demonſtrate to us every day, that theſe are begun on falſe hopes, carried on with diſquietude, and end in diſappointment. This profeſſed incompatibility with the little, wretched, and iniquitous buſineſs of the world, is therefore ſo far from being a defect in this religion, that, was there no other proof of its

its divine origin, this alone, I think, would be abundantly ſufficient. The great plan and benevolent deſign of this diſpenſation is plainly this; to enlighten the minds, purify the religion, and amend the morals of mankind in general, and to ſelect the moſt meritorious of them to be ſucceſſively tranſplanted into the kingdom of heaven: Which gracious offer is impartially tendered to all, who by perſeverance in meekneſs, patience, piety, charity, and a detachment from the world, are willing to qualify themſelves for this holy and happy ſociety. Was this univerſally accepted, and did every man obſerve ſtrictly every precept of

of the goſpel, the face of human affairs and the œconomy of the world would indeed be greatly changed; but ſurely they would be changed for the better; and we ſhould enjoy much more happineſs, even here, than at preſent: For we muſt not forget, that evils are by it forbid as well as reſiſtance; injuries, as well as revenge; all unwillingneſs to diffuſe the enjoyments of life, as well as ſolicitude to acquire them; all obſtacles to ambition, as well as ambition itſelf; and therefore all contentions for power and intereſt would be at an end; and the world would go on much more happily than it now does. But this

this univerſal acceptance of ſuch an offer was never expected from ſo depraved and imperfect a creature as man, and therefore could never have been any part of the deſign: For it was foreknown and foretold by him who made it; that few, very few would accept it on theſe terms. He ſays, "Strait "is the gate, and narrow is the "way which leadeth into life, and "few there be that find it*:" Accordingly we ſee, that very few are prevailed on by the hopes of future happineſs, to relinquiſh the purſuits of preſent pleaſures or intereſts, and therefore theſe purſuits are little interrupted by the ſe-

* Matt. vii. 4.

ceſſion

ceſſion of ſo inconſiderable a number: As the natural world ſubſiſts by the ſtruggles of the ſame elements, ſo does the moral by the contentions of the ſame paſſions, as from the beginning: The generality of mankind are actuated by the ſame motives, fight, ſcuffle, and ſcramble for power, riches, and pleaſures with the ſame eagerneſs: all occupations and profeſſions are exerciſed with the ſame alacrity, and there are ſoldiers, lawyers, ſtateſmen, patriots, and politicians, juſt as if Chriſtianity had never exiſted. Thus, we ſee this wonderful diſpenſation has anſwered all the purpoſes for which it was intended: It has enlightened the

minds, purified the religion, and amended the morals of mankind; and, without ſubverting the conſtitution, policy, or buſineſs of the world, opened a gate, though a ſtrait one, through which all, who are wiſe enough to chuſe it, and good enough to be fit for it, may find an entrance into the kingdom of heaven.

Others have ſaid, that if this revelation had really been from God, his infinite power and goodneſs could never have ſuffered it to have been ſo ſoon perverted from its original purity, to have continued in a ſtate of corruption through the courſe of ſo many ages, and at laſt to have proved ſo ineffectual to the

reformation

reformation of mankind. To theſe I anſwer, that all this, on examination, will be found inevitable, from the nature of all revelations communicated to ſo imperfect a creature as man, and from circumſtances peculiar to the riſe and progreſs of the Chriſtian in particular: for when this was firſt preached to the gentile nations, though they were not able to withſtand the force of its evidence, and therefore received it; yet they could not be prevailed on to relinquiſh their old ſuperſtitions, and former opinions, but choſe rather to incorporate them with it: By which means it was neceſſarily mixed with their ignorance, and their

learning; by both which it was equally injured. The people defaced its worſhip by blending it with their idolatrous ceremonies, and the philoſophers corrupted its doctrines by weaving them up with the notions of the Gnoſtics, Myſtics, and Manichæans, the prevailing ſyſtems of thoſe times. By degrees its irreſiſtible excellence gained over princes, potentates, and conquerors to its intereſts, and it was ſupported by their patronage: but that patronage ſoon engaged it in their politics and conteſts, and deſtroyed that excellence by which it had been acquired. At length the meek and humble profeſſors of the goſpel inſlaved

inſlaved theſe princes, and conquered theſe conquerors their patrons, and erected for themſelves ſuch a ſtupendous fabric of wealth and power, as the world had never ſeen: they then propagated their religion by the ſame methods, by which it had been perſecuted; nations were converted by fire and ſword, and the vanquiſhed were baptized with daggers at their throats. All theſe events we ſee proceed from a chain of cauſes and conſequences, which could not have been broken without changing the eſtabliſhed courſe of things by a conſtant ſeries of miracles, or a total alteration of human nature: whilſt that continues as it is, the pureſt

religion muſt be corrupted by a conjunction with power and riches, and it will alſo then appear to be much more corrupted than it really is: becauſe many are inclined to think, that every deviation from its primitive ſtate is a corruption: Chriſtianity was at firſt preached by the poor and mean, in holes and caverns, under the iron rod of perſecution, and therefore many abſurdly conclude, that any degree of wealth or power in its miniſters, or of magnificence in its worſhip, are corruptions inconſiſtent with the genuine ſimplicity of its original ſtate: they are offended, that modern biſhops ſhould poſſeſs titles, palaces, revenues, and coaches,

when

when it is notorious, that their predeceſſors the apoſtles were deſpicable wanderers, without houſes, or money, and walked on foot. The apoſtles indeed lived in a ſtate of poverty and perſecution attendant on their particular ſituation, and the work which they had undertaken: this was their misfortune, but no part of their religion, and therefore it can be no more incumbent on their ſucceſſors to imitate their poverty and meanneſs, than to be whipped, impriſoned, and put to death, in compliance with their example. Theſe are all but the ſuggeſtions of envy and malevolence, but no objections to theſe fortunate alte-

rations in Chriſtianity and its profeſſors; which, if not abuſed to the purpoſes of tyranny and ſuperſtition, are in fact no more than the neceſſary and proper effects of its more proſperous ſituation. When a poor man grows rich, or a ſervant becomes a maſter, they ſhould take care that their exaltation prompts them not to be unjuſt or inſolent; but ſurely it is not requiſite or right, that their behaviour and mode of living ſhould be exactly the ſame, when their ſituation is altered. How far this inſtitution has been effectual to the reformation of mankind, it is not eaſy now to aſcertain, becauſe the enormities which prevailed

vailed before the appearance of it are by time ſo far removed from our ſight, that they are ſcarcely viſible; but thoſe of the moſt gigantic ſize ſtill remain in the records of hiſtory, as monuments of the reſt: wars in thoſe ages were carried on with a ferocity and cruelty unknown to the preſent: whole cities and nations were extirpated by fire and ſword; and thouſands of the vanquiſhed were crucified and impaled for having endeavoured only to defend themſelves and their country. The lives of new born infants were then intirely at the diſpoſal of their parents, who were at liberty to bring them up, or to expoſe them to periſh by cold and hunger, or to

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be devoured by birds and beaſts; and this was frequently practiſed without puniſhment, and even without cenſure. Gladiators were employed by hundreds to cut one another to pieces in public theatres for the diverſion of the moſt polite aſſemblies; and though theſe combators at firſt conſiſted of criminals only, by degrees men of the higheſt rank, and even ladies of the moſt illuſtrious families, enrolled themſelves in this honourable liſt. On many occaſions human ſacrifices were ordained; and at the funerals of rich and eminent perſons, great numbers of their ſlaves were murdered as victims pleaſing to their departed ſpirits.

ſpirits. The moſt infamous obſcenities were made part of their religious worſhip, and the moſt unnatural luſts publickly avowed, and celebrated by their moſt admired poets. At the approach of Chriſtianity all theſe horrid abominations vaniſhed; and amongſt thoſe who firſt embraced it, ſcarce a ſingle vice was to be found: to ſuch an amazing degree of piety, charity, temperance, patience, and reſignation were the primitive converts exalted, that they ſeem literally to have been regenerated, and purified from all the imperfections of human nature; and to have purſued ſuch a conſtant and uniform courſe of devotion, innocence,

nocence, and virtue, as, in the preſent times, it is almoſt as difficult for us to conceive as to imitate. If it is aſked, why ſhould not the belief of the ſame religion now produce the ſame effects? the anſwer is ſhort, becauſe it is not believed: The moſt ſovereign medicine can perform no cure, if the patient will not be perſuaded to take it. Yet notwithſtanding all impediments, it has certainly done a great deal towards diminiſhing the vices, and correcting the diſpoſitions of mankind; and was it univerſally adopted in belief and practice, would totally eradicate both ſin and puniſhment. But this was never expected, or deſigned, or poſſible,

poſſible, becauſe, if their exiſtence did not ariſe from ſome neceſſity to us unknown, they never would have been permitted to exiſt at all; and therefore they can no more be extirpated, than they could have been prevented: for this would certainly be incompatible with the frame and conſtitution of this world, and in all probability with that of another. And this, I think, well accounts for that reſerve and obſcurity with which this religion was at firſt promulgated, and that want of irreſiſtible evidence of its truth, by which it might poſſibly have been enforced. Chriſt ſays to his diſciples, "To you it is "given to know the myſtery of

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"the kingdom of God; but unto "them that are without, all theſe "things are done in parables; "that ſeeing they may ſee, and not "perceive, and hearing they may "hear and not underſtand; leſt "at any time they ſhould be con-"verted, and their ſins ſhould be "forgiven them*." That is, to you by peculiar favour it is given to know and underſtand the doctrines of my religion, and by that means to qualify yourſelves for the kingdom of heaven; but to the multitude without, that is to all mankind in general, this indulgence cannot be extended; becauſe that all men ſhould be exempted

* Mark iv. 11, 12.

from ſin and puniſhment is utterly repugnant to the univerſal ſyſtem, and that conſtitution of things, which infinite wiſdom has thought proper to adopt.

Objections have likewiſe been raiſed to the divine authority of this religion from the incredibility of ſome of its doctrines, particularly of thoſe concerning the Trinity, and atonement for ſin by the ſufferings and death of Chriſt; the one contradicting all the principles of human reaſon, and the other all our ideas of divine juſtice. To theſe objections I ſhall only ſay, that no arguments founded on principles, which we cannot comprehend, can poſſibly diſprove a propoſition already

already proved on principles which we do underſtand; and therefore that on this ſubject they ought not to be attended to: That three Beings ſhould be one Being, is a propoſition which certainly contradicts reaſon, that is, *our* reaſon; but it does not from thence follow, that it cannot be true: for there are many propoſitions which contradict our reaſon, and yet are demonſtrably true: one is the very firſt principle of all religion, the being of a God; for that any thing ſhould exiſt without a cauſe, or that any thing ſhould be the cauſe of its own exiſtence, are propoſitions equally contradictory to our reaſon; yet one of them muſt be

true,

true, or nothing could ever have exiſted: in like manner the overruling grace of the Creator, and the free-will of his creatures, his certain fore-knowledge of future events, and the uncertain contingency of thoſe events, are to our apprehenſions abſolute contradictions to each other; and yet the truth of every one of theſe is demonſtrable from Scripture, reaſon, and experience. All theſe difficulties ariſe from our imagining, that the mode of exiſtence of all Beings muſt be ſimilar to our own; that is, that they muſt all exiſt in time, and ſpace; and hence proceeds our embarraſſment on this ſubject. We know, that no two Beings, with whoſe

mode of exiſtence we are acquainted, can exiſt in the ſame point of time in the ſame point of ſpace, and that therefore they cannot be one: but how far Beings, whoſe mode of exiſtence bears no relation to time or ſpace, may be united, we cannot comprehend: and therefore the poſſibility of ſuch an union we cannot poſitively deny. In like manner our reaſon informs us, that the puniſhment of the innocent, inſtead of the guilty, is diametrically oppoſite to juſtice, rectitude, and all pretenſions to utility; but we ſhould alſo remember, that the ſhort line of our reaſon cannot reach to the bottom of this queſtion: it cannot inform us, by what means

means either guilt or puniſhment ever gained a place in the works of a Creator infinitely good and powerful, whoſe goodneſs muſt have induced him, and whoſe power muſt have enabled him to exclude them: It cannot aſſure us, that ſome ſufferings of individuals are not neceſſary to the happineſs and well-being of the whole: It cannot convince us, that they do not actually ariſe from this neceſſity, or that, for this cauſe, they may not be required of us, and levied like a tax for the public benefit; or that this tax may not be paid by one Being, as well as another; and therefore, if voluntarily offered, be juſtly accepted

from the innocent inſtead of the guilty. Of all theſe circumſtances we are totally ignorant; nor can our reaſon afford us any information, and therefore we are not able to aſſert, that this meaſure is contrary to juſtice, or void of utility: for, unleſs we could firſt reſolve that great queſtion, whence came evil? we can decide nothing on the diſpenſations of Providence; becauſe they muſt neceſſarily be connected with that undiſcoverable principle; and, as we know not the root of the diſeaſe, we cannot judge of what is, or is not, a proper and effectual remedy. It is remarkable, that, notwithſtanding all the ſeeming abſurdities of this

doctrine, there is one circumſtance much in its favour; which is, that it has been univerſally adopted in all ages, as far as hiſtory can carry us back in our inquiries to the earlieſt times; in which we find all nations civilized and barbarous, however differing in all other religious opinions, agreeing alone in the expediency of appeaſing their offended Deities by ſacrifices, that is, by the vicarious ſufferings of men or other animals. This notion could never have been derived from reaſon, becauſe it directly contradicts it; nor from ignorance, becauſe ignorance could never have contrived ſo unaccountable an expedient, nor have been uniform in

all ages and countries in any opinion whatſoever; nor from the artifice of kings or prieſts, in order to acquire dominion over the people, becauſe it ſeems not adapted to this end, and we find it implanted in the minds of the moſt remote ſavages at this day diſcovered, who have neither kings or prieſts artifice, or dominion amongſt them. It muſt therefore be derived from natural inſtinct, or ſupernatural revelation, both which are equally the operations of divine power. If it is further urged, that however true theſe doctrines may be, yet it muſt be inconſiſtent with the juſtice and goodneſs of the Creator, to require from his crea-

tures the belief of propoſitions which contradict, or are above the reach of that reaſon, which he has thought proper to beſtow upon them. To this I anſwer, that genuine Chriſtianity requires no ſuch belief: It has diſcovered to us many important truths, with which we were before intirely unacquainted, and amongſt them are theſe, that three Beings are ſomeway united in the divine eſſence, and that God will accept of the ſufferings of Chriſt as an atonement for the ſins of mankind. Theſe, conſidered as declarations of facts only, neither contradict, or are above the reach of human reaſon: The firſt is a propoſition as

plain, as that three equilateral lines compoſe one triangle; the other is as intelligible, as that one man ſhould diſcharge the debts of another. In what manner this union is formed, or why God accepts theſe vicarious puniſhments, or to what purpoſes they may be ſubſervient, it informs us not, becauſe no information could enable us to comprehend theſe myſteries, and therefore it does not require that we ſhould know or believe any thing about them. The truth of theſe doctrines muſt reſt intirely on the authority of thoſe who taught them; but then we ſhould reflect that thoſe were the ſame perſons who taught us a

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ſyſtem of religion more ſublime, and of ethics more perfect, than any which our faculties were ever able to diſcover, but which when diſcovered are exactly conſonant to our reaſon, and that therefore we ſhould not haſtily reject thoſe informations which they have vouchſafed to give us, of which our reaſon is not a competent judge. If an able mathematician proves to us the truth of ſeveral propoſitions by demonſtrations which we underſtand, we heſitate not on his authority to aſſent to others, the proceſs of whoſe proofs we are not able to follow: why therefore ſhould we refuſe that credit to Chriſt and his Apoſtles, which we think

think reaſonable to give to one another?

Many have objected to the whole ſcheme of this revelation as partial, fluctuating, indeterminate, unjuſt, and unworthy of an omniſcient and omnipotent author, who cannot be ſuppoſed to have favoured particular perſons, countries, and times, with this divine communication, while others no leſs meritorious have been altogether excluded from its benefits; nor to have changed and counteracted his own deſigns; that is, to have formed mankind able and diſpoſed to render themſelves miſerable by their own wickedneſs, and then to have contrived ſo

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ſtrange an expedient to reſtore them to that happineſs, which they need never have been permitted to forfeit; and this to be brought about by the unneceſſary interpoſition of a mediator. To all this I ſhall only ſay, that however unaccountable this may appear to us, who ſee but as ſmall a part of the Chriſtian, as of the univerſal plan of creation, they are both in regard to all theſe circumſtances exactly analogous to each other. In all the diſpenſations of Providence, with which we are acquainted, benefits are diſtributed in a ſimilar manner; health and ſtrength, ſenſe and ſcience, wealth and power, are all beſtowed on

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individuals and communities in different degrees and at different times. The whole œconomy of this world conſiſts of evils and remedies; and theſe for the moſt part adminiſtered by the inſtrumentality of intermediate agents. God has permitted us to plunge ourſelves into poverty, diſtreſs, and miſery, by our own vices, and has afforded us the advice, inſtructions, and examples of others, to deter or extricate us from theſe calamities. He has formed us ſubject to innumerable diſeaſes, and he has beſtowed on us a variety of remedies. He has made us liable to hunger, thirſt, and nakedneſs, and he ſupplies us with food,

food, drink, and cloathing, uſually by the adminiſtration of others. He has created poiſons, and he has provided antidotes. He has ordained the winter's cold to cure the peſtilential heats of the ſummer, and the ſummer's ſunſhine to dry up the inundations of the winter. Why the conſtitution of nature is ſo formed, why all the viſible diſpenſations of Providence are ſuch, and why ſuch is the Chriſtian diſpenſation alſo, we know not, nor have faculties to comprehend. God might certainly have made the material world a ſyſtem of perfect beauty and regularity, without evils, and without remedies; and the Chriſtian diſpenſation a ſcheme only

only of moral virtue productive of happineſs, without the intervention of any atonement or mediation. He might have exempted our bodies from all diſeaſes, and our minds from all depravity, and we ſhould then have ſtood in no need of medicines to reſtore us to health, or expedients to reconcile us to his favour. It ſeems indeed to our ignorance, that this would have been more conſiſtent with juſtice and reaſon; but his infinite wiſdom has decided in another manner, and formed the ſyſtems both of Nature and Chriſtianity on other principles, and theſe ſo exactly ſimilar, that we have cauſe to conclude that they both muſt

proceed

proceed from the ſame ſource of divine power and wiſdom, however inconſiſtent with our reaſon they may appear. Reaſon is undoubtedly our ſureſt guide in all matters, which lie within the narrow circle of her intelligence: On the ſubject of revelation her province is only to examine into its authority, and when that is once proved, ſhe has no more to do, but to acquieſce in its doctrines, and therefore is never ſo ill employed, as when ſhe pretends to accommodate them to her own ideas of rectitude and truth. God, ſays this ſelf-ſufficient teacher, is perfectly wiſe, juſt, and good; and what is the inference? That all his diſpenſations muſt be con-

conformable to our notions of perfect wiſdom, juſtice, and goodneſs: but it ſhould firſt be proved, that man is as perfect, and as wiſe as his Creator, or this conſequence will by no means follow; but rather the reverſe, that is, that the diſpenſations of a perfect and all-wiſe Being muſt probably appear unreaſonable, and perhaps unjuſt, to a Being imperfect and ignorant; and therefore their ſeeming impoſſibility may be a mark of their truth, and in ſome meaſure juſtify that pious rant of a mad enthuſiaſt, "Credo, quia impoſſibile." Nor is it the leaſt ſurpriſing, that we are not able to underſtand the ſpiritual diſpenſations of the Almighty,

mighty, when his material works are to us no leſs incomprehenſible, our reaſon can afford us no inſight into thoſe great properties of matter, gravitation, attraction, elaſticity, and electricity, nor even into the eſſence of matter itſelf: Can reaſon teach us how the ſun's luminous orb can fill a circle whoſe diameter contains many millions of miles, with a conſtant inundation of ſucceſſive rays during thouſands of years, without any perceivable diminution of that body, from whence they are continually poured, or any augmentation of thoſe bodies on which they fall, and by which they are conſtantly abſorbed? Can

reaſon tell us how thoſe rays, darted with a velocity greater than that of a cannon ball, can ſtrike the tendereſt organs of the human frame without inflicting any degree of pain, or by what means this percuſſion only can convey the forms of diſtant objects to an immaterial mind? or how any union can be formed between material and immaterial eſſences, or how the wounds of the body can give pain to the ſoul, or the anxiety of the ſoul can emaciate and deſtroy the body? That all theſe things are ſo, we have viſible and indiſputable demonſtration; but how they can be ſo, is to us as incomprehenſible, as the moſt

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abſtruſe myſteries of Revelation can poſſibly be. In ſhort, we ſee ſo ſmall a part of the great Whole, we know ſo little of the relation, which the preſent life bears to pre-exiſtent and future ſtates; we can conceive ſo little of the nature of God, and his attributes, or mode of exiſtence; we can comprehend ſo little of the material, and ſo much leſs of the moral plan on which the univerſe is conſtituted, or on what principle it proceeds, that, if a revelation from ſuch a Being, on ſuch ſubjects, was in every part familiar to our underſtandings, and conſonant to our reaſon; we ſhould have great cauſe to ſuſpect its divine authority; and therefore, had this

revelation been leſs incomprehenſible, it would certainly have been more incredible.

But I ſhall not enter further into the conſideration of theſe abſtruſe and difficult ſpeculations, becauſe the diſcuſſion of them would render this ſhort eſſay too tedious and laborious a taſk for the peruſal of them, for whom it was principally intended; which are all thoſe buſy or idle perſons, whoſe time and thoughts are wholly engroſſed by the purſuits of buſineſs, or pleaſure, ambition, or luxury, who know nothing of this religion, except what they have accidentally picked up by deſultory converſation or ſuperficial reading, and have

have thence determined with themſelves, that a pretended revelation founded on ſo ſtrange and improbable a ſtory, ſo contradictory to reaſon, ſo adverſe to the world and all its occupations, ſo incredible in its doctrines, and in its precepts ſo impracticable, can be nothing more than the impoſition of prieſtcraft upon ignorant and illiterate ages, and artfully continued as an engine well-adapted to awe and govern the ſuperſtitious vulgar. To talk to ſuch about the Chriſtian religion, is to converſe with the deaf concerning muſic, or with the blind on the beauties of painting: They want all ideas relative to the ſubject,

and therefore can never be made to comprehend it: to enable them to do this, their minds muſt be formed for theſe conceptions by contemplation, retirement, and abſtraction from buſineſs and diſſipation, by ill-health, diſappointments, and diſtreſſes; and poſſibly by divine interpoſition, or by enthuſiaſm, which is uſually miſtaken for it. Without ſome of theſe preparatory aids, together with a competent degree of learning and application, it is impoſſible that they can think or know, underſtand or believe, any thing about it. If they profeſs to believe, they deceive others; if they fancy that they believe, they deceive themſelves.

ſelves. I am ready to acknowledge, that theſe gentlemen, as far as their information reaches, are perfectly in the right; and if they are endued with good underſtandings, which have been entirely devoted to the buſineſs or amuſements of the world, they can paſs no other judgment, and muſt revolt from the hiſtory and doctrines of this religion. "The preaching Chriſt "crucified was to the Jews a "ſtumbling-block, and to the "Greeks fooliſhneſs*;" and ſo it muſt appear to all, who, like them, judge from eſtabliſhed prejudices, falſe learning, and ſuperficial knowledge; for thoſe who are

* 1 Cor. i. 26.

quite unable to follow the chain of its prophecy, to ſee the beauty and juſtneſs of its moral precepts, and to enter into the wonders of its diſpenſations, can form no other idea of this revelation, but that of a confuſed rhapſody of fictions and abſurdities.

If it is aſked, Was Chriſtianity then intended only for learned divines and profound philoſophers? I anſwer, No: it was at firſt preached by the illiterate, and received by the ignorant; and to ſuch are the practical, which are the moſt neceſſary parts of it ſufficiently intelligible: but the proofs of its authority undoubtedly are not, becauſe theſe muſt be chiefly drawn from

ſrom other parts, of a ſpeculative nature, opening to our inquiries inexhauſtible diſcoveries concerning the nature, attributes, and diſpenſations of God, which cannot be underſtood without ſome learning and much attention. From theſe the generality of mankind muſt neceſſarily be excluded, and muſt therefore truſt to others for the grounds of their belief, if they believe at all. And hence perhaps it is, that faith, or eaſineſs of belief, is ſo frequently and ſo ſtrongly recommended in the goſpel; becauſe if men require proofs, of which they themſelves are incapable, and thoſe who have no knowledge on this important ſubject

ject will not place ſome confidence in thoſe who have; the illiterate and unattentive muſt ever continue in a ſtate of unbelief: but then all ſuch ſhould remember, that in all ſciences, even in mathematics themſelves, there are many propoſitions, which on a curſory view appear to the moſt acute underſtandings uninſtructed in that ſcience, to be impoſſible to be true, which yet on a cloſer examination are found to be truths capable of the ſtricteſt demonſtration; and that therefore in diſquiſitions on which we cannot determine without much learned inveſtigation, reaſon uninformed is by no means to be depended on;

and

and from hence they ought ſurely to conclude, that it may be at leaſt as poſſible for them to be miſtaken in diſbelieving this revelation, who know nothing of the matter, as for thoſe great maſters of reaſon and erudition, Grotius, Bacon, Newton, Boyle, Locke, Addiſon, and Lyttelton, to be deceived in their belief: a belief, to which they firmly adhered after the moſt diligent and learned reſearches into the authenticity of its records, the completion of the prophecies, the ſublimity of its doctrines, the purity of its precepts, and the arguments of its adverſaries; a belief, which they have teſtified to the world by their writings, without

out any other motive, than their regard for truth and the benefit of mankind. Should the few foregoing pages add but one mite to the treaſures with which theſe learned writers have enriched the world; if they ſhould be ſo fortunate as to perſuade any of theſe minute philoſophers to place ſome confidence in theſe great opinions, and to diſtruſt their own; if they ſhould be able to convince them, that notwithſtanding all unfavourable appearances, Chriſtianity may not be altogether artifice and error; if they ſhould prevail on them to examine it with ſome attention, or, if that is too much trouble, not to reject it without any examination

tion at all; the purpoſe of this little work will be ſufficiently anſwered. Had the arguments herein uſed, and the new hints here flung out, been more largely diſcuſſed, it might eaſily have been extended to a more conſiderable bulk; but then the buſy would not have had leiſure, nor the idle inclination to have read it. Should it ever have the honour to be admitted into ſuch good company, they will immediately, I know, determine, that it muſt be the work of ſome enthuſiaſt or methodiſt, ſome beggar, or ſome madman. I ſhall therefore beg leave to aſſure them, that the author is very far removed from all theſe characters: that he

he once perhaps believed as little as themſelves; but having ſome leiſure and more curioſity, he employed them both in reſolving a queſtion which ſeemed to him of ſome importance,—Whether Chriſtianity was really an impoſture founded on an abſurd, incredible, and obſolete fable, as many ſuppoſe it? Or whether it is, what it pretends to be, a revelation communicated to mankind by the interpoſition of ſupernatural power? On a candid enquiry, he ſoon found, that the firſt was an abſolute impoſſibility, and that its pretenſions to the latter were founded on the moſt ſolid grounds: In the further purſuit of his examination,

nation, he perceived, at every ſtep, new lights ariſing, and ſome of the brighteſt from parts of it the moſt obſcure, but productive of the cleareſt proofs, becauſe equally beyond the power of human artifice to invent, and human reaſon to diſcover. Theſe arguments, which have convinced him of the divine origin of this religion, he has here put together in as clear and conciſe a manner as he was able, thinking they might have the ſame effect upon others, and being of opinion, that if there were a few more true Chriſtians in the world, it would be beneficial to themſelves, and by no means detrimental to the public.

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